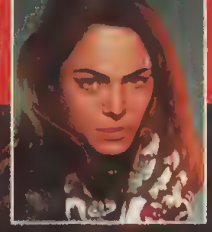
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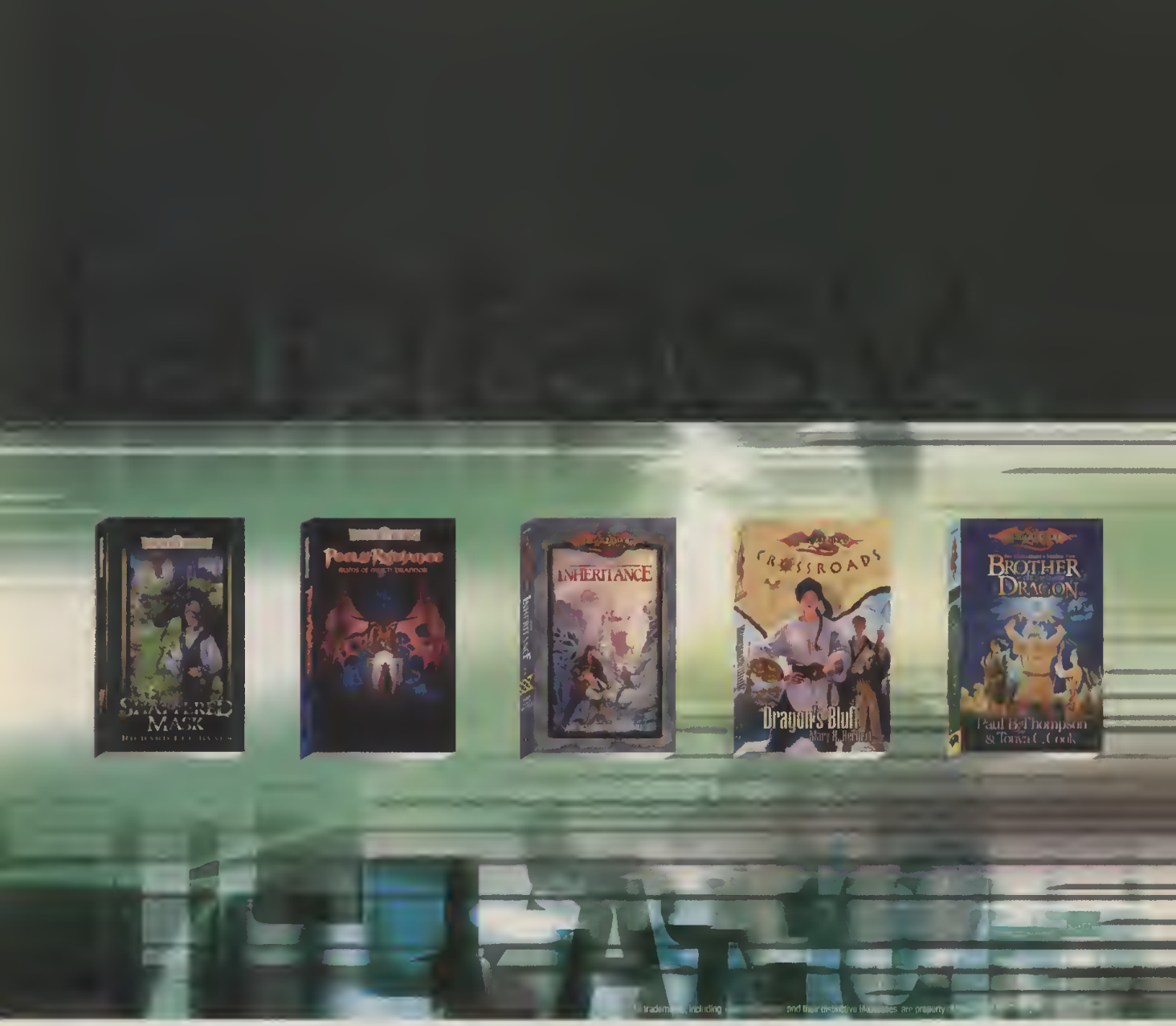
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contents



RIGHT: Michael Whelan is the featured artist in the Gallery. Shown here is a detail of Erosion.

COVER: Painting by Luis Royo.

departments

8 LETTERS

12 TELEVISION

By Resa Nelson

Witchblade is part homicide story and part mystery.

20 MOVIES

By Resa Nelson

Edgar Allan Poe plumbs the depths of the unconscious mind.

30 BOOKS

By Gahan Wilson and Paul Di Filippo

Jeff VanderMeer introduces the strange and ancient city of Ambergris.

70 GALLERY

By Karen Haber

Michael Whelan: Leap of faith.

86 GAMES

By Eric T. Baker

The arcade classic *Gauntlet* is back with a 3-D vengeance.

98 CONTRIBUTORS

fiction

40 BIG CITY LITTLES

By Charles de Lint

Faith, hope, and charity are all virtues, and sometimes it can be difficult—yet essential—to tell them apart.

50 LIMNERY IN CURSIVE

By Terry McGarry

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. A lot of knowledge is a lot more dangerous—to those who have it.

56 THE SEA OF TIME AND SPACE

By Liz Williams

True sacrifice requires true vision, but how can a visionary know what's true?

60 ONCE

By Jack Slay, Jr.

No gift comes without a price. You just have to decide if it's too high.

66 PATTERNS

By Mary Soon Lee

All things must pass, they say. What they don't say is when.

76 A HOLE IN HER HEAD

By Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff

Is great art a door into another universe? Or is it simply a slice of pathology?

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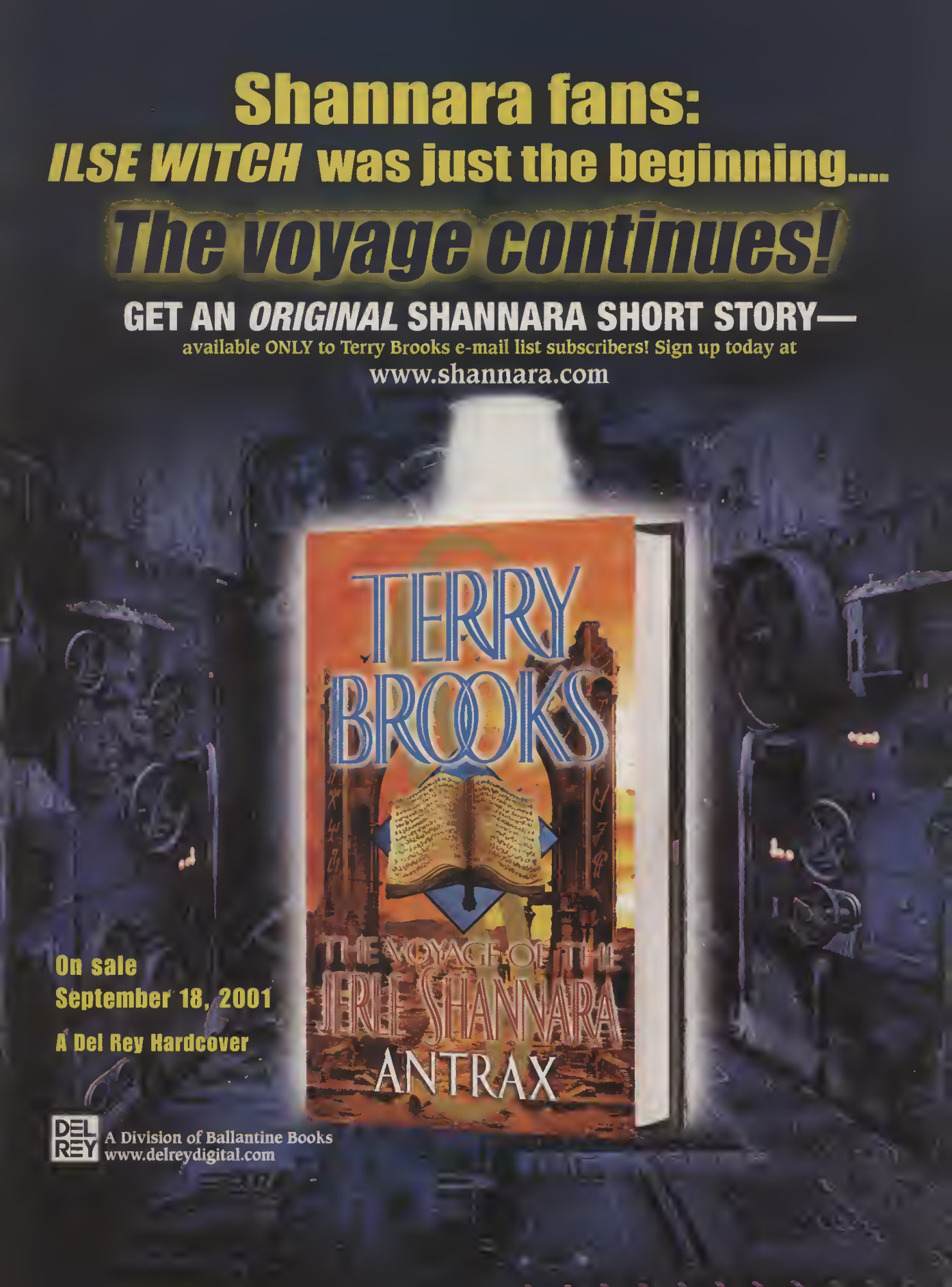
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letters

Dear Shawna,

The story of *The Wizard of Oz* will never die as long as there are other creators who take over the helm with further stories. I have found new takes on the story in cartoons and new novels. I really enjoyed "Giants, Ogres, and Trolls," by Lois Tilton. This tale was a great take on Dorothy's legacy through the land of Oz. I don't know if you realize this, but the *Wizard of Oz* story crossed over with the *Alice in Wonderland* story in a comic book called *Captain Carrot and the Zoo Crew*, which was published by DC Comics. Of course Captain Carrot crossed over with Superman. This places Superman, Captain Carrot, Alice, and Dorothy all in the same Multiverse. I thought you and your readers might enjoy this tidbit of information. *The Mists of Avalon* cover was super!

Sincerely yours,
MSG Paul Leaird
First Air Cavalry, U.S. Army
Sparta, Wisconsin

Dear *Realms of Fantasy*,

I feel Deborah Cutler should be corrected for a statement she made in her letter concerning the *Dragonlance* RPG and the author's reliance upon the system. "The Dragonlance Chronicles" Trilogy written by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman had been written before *Dungeons & Dragons* had incorporated *Dragonlance* into its RPG system. The Trilogy had been the basis for the *Dragonlance* RPG by TSR (now Wizards of the Coast) and its future novels.

After reading the letter, I called my old college buddies and we all came to the same conclusion ... if Deborah Cutler had only just seen the original publication date of "The Dragonlance Chronicles" Trilogy and TSR's *Dragonlance* RPG, she would have known this. ... It had been assumed by everyone that Ms. Cutler did not research this fact thoroughly. ...

"Thank goodness for open-minded advisors!" ... but a little bit more research by both her senior thesis adviser as well as Deborah herself was needed.

Sincerely,
BMG

Dear Ms. McCarthy,

In your response to Bryan Jones' letter in the editorial of the April 2001 issue, you did compare "mimetic" fiction and fantasy to strict-form poetry (the sonnet) and free verse, with the implication that fantasy, like free verse, is a genre defined by a relative or apparent absence of generic constraint. This set me to wondering—a bad habit, but anyway ... A lot of commercial fantasy is written to constraints so strict they amount to a formula. Is there not a sense in which genre fiction—of all varieties—might be the present-day equivalent of strict-form poetry such as the sonnet? After all, sonnet sequences such as Shakespeare's were a recognized genre and a popular one in the Elizabethan period, just as genre fictions such as fantasy and the detective story are today. And, as has been said of medieval lyrics, the fact that texts are written to conform to a formula is not always as important as whether, or how, they engage with all the implications, opportunities, and restrictions which the formula imposes on them. The "Dragonlance" books, to use the established example, and Patricia A. McKillip's "Riddle of Stars" both adhere to generic constraints (if not quite the same ones); but there is no comparison between them in terms of the way they engage with their forms.

Thank you for a reliably entertaining and interesting magazine. I have enjoyed reading it for two issues now, and am glad that Australian release dates do not seem to lag several months behind northern-hemispere ones as is the case with most overseas magazines.

Yours sincerely,
Kerrie Le Lievre
Daw Park, Adelaide, S.A.
Australia

Pleasure to hear from a reader in Australia and found your musings to be quite interesting ...

Dear *Realms of Fantasy*,

Just wanted to say you outdid yourselves in the June 2001 issue with the artwork accompanying the fiction. I especially liked the illustration by Patrick Arrasmith and Allen Douglas for the Harlan Ellison story. The illustration for "The Stars Underfoot" by David Beck was truly "chilling"—no pun intended. All the other artwork was terrific, too. I also want to say I think *Realms of Fantasy* does an incredible job balancing the modern with the "medieval."

Kelly Ames-O'Rouke
Boston, Massachusetts

We do have a great collection of artists who provide illustrations for Realms of Fantasy*—often on short notice. We think they are terrific as well!*

Your letters are welcome. Send them to: Letters to the Editor, Realms of Fantasy, *P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, e-mail to: shawnam896@aol.com*

REALMS OF FANTASY

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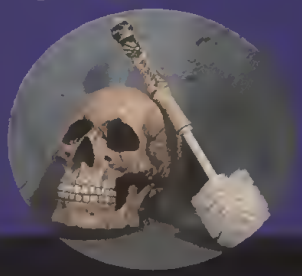
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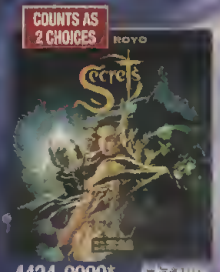
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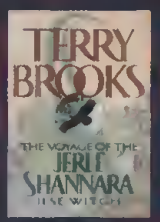
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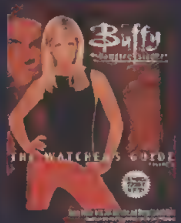
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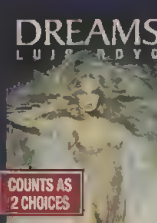
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By Resa Nelson

Witchblade is part homicide story and part ongoing mystery.

In addition to bringing *The Mists of Avalon* to television as a miniseries, TNT has been airing the first 11 episodes of *Witchblade*, a series that combines the drama of a homicide detective show with the dreamlike, supernatural elements of a comic book fantasy. *Witchblade* is smart, visually unique, and revolves around the deliciously slow unraveling of a mystery. But what really sets *Witchblade* apart from a typical network series are the very unusual and changing relationships of its characters.



Yancy Butler stars as Sara Pezzini and David Chokachi plays her partner, Jake McCartey, in the TNT series Witchblade.

Witchblade began as a made-for-TNT movie that was based on the comic book by the same name—in fact, Top Cow, the company that produces the comic book, is one of the producers of the TV series. When the movie ranked high in ratings, TNT ordered up 11 episodes for a series, which began airing in June this year. If you missed the beginning episodes during its first run, keep an eye open for TNT to run the entire series again in the near future. If you like what you see, let them know. If fans respond well to *Witchblade*, TNT is likely to keep making new episodes.

Witchblade is the story of Sara Pezzini (played by Yancy Butler of *Drop Zone*, *Hard Target*, and TV's *Mann & Machine*), a New York City homicide detective. When Sara was a child, her mother died. Sara's father was a cop who died in the line of duty; as a result, she is committed to fighting for justice.

While Sara is investigating the murder of a friend, she chases a suspect into a museum. The gunfire between them accidentally breaks the glass of a display case. A museum piece in that display case seems to open an eye and recognize Sara. The artifact looks like a cross between a weapon and a piece of jewelry—this is the Witchblade. In the midst of crossfire, it flies out of the display case and attaches itself to Sara's wrist.

The concept of the Witchblade is that it's intelligent. It can transform itself into a metal gauntlet or the blade of a sword or a bracelet. It's been on Earth for a long, long time. It's the source of great power, as well as the protector of whoever owns it. It's had many owners, possibly including Cleopatra and Joan of Arc. But the Witchblade isn't something that you can possess.

The Witchblade possesses you.

When Sara walks out of the museum in the aftermath of the gunfight, she discovers a bracelet around her wrist. She's confused. She doesn't understand what the bracelet is or what it's doing on her wrist or what's just happened inside the museum.

Yancy Butler describes how Sara responds to the Witchblade. "I think my character is scared because she honestly does feel as if she's losing her mind. It is a scary thing that's happening to her.

"Why doesn't she get rid of this thing? She can't. It won't come off. We saw that in the pilot. She des-

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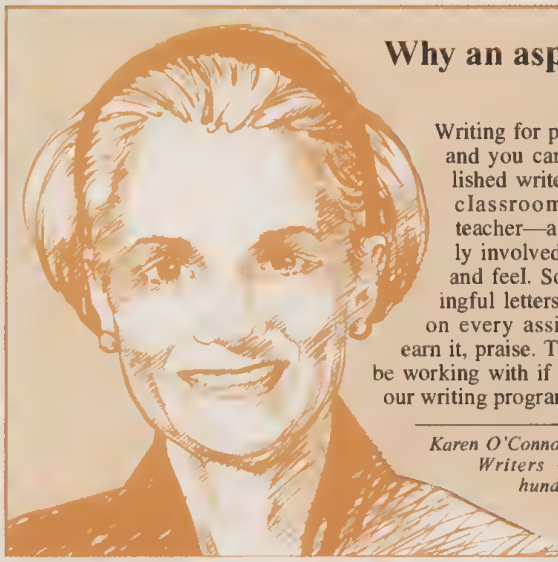
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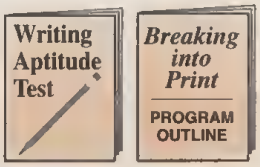
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ABOVE: Sara Pezzini confronts a mysterious suspect in a museum in the series' TNT movie pilot. RIGHT: Jake McCartey is a former surfing champion who becomes Sara's partner after her original partner, Danny Woo, is killed.

perately tried to. And I think now she doesn't want to. She's intrigued by it. You know, some of the things that scare us are the things that are good for us. It's empowering her in a certain way. But it's a frightening force as well. She just can't quite get around to letting it go."

What Sara gradually learns is that the Witchblade chose her as its new owner. But it's the Witchblade that decides when and how to transform itself, which is typically to help Sara when she's in need. But what Sara also learns is that the Witchblade has a history of abandoning its owner at the very moment when she needs it the most.

On one hand, every episode of *Witchblade* is a stand-alone homicide story. On the other hand, *Witchblade* is an ongoing mystery. Why has the Witchblade chosen Sara? What are the mysteries of her past that even she doesn't know about? Is Sara connected to the previous owners of the Witchblade—and, if so, how? Who are all of the people who want the Witchblade?

Witchblade is a richly woven tapestry where every single thread matters.

One of the most interesting and mysterious characters is Kenneth Irons (played by Anthony Cistaro of TV's *Angel*, *Cheers*, and *Alright Already*). Irons is a billionaire businessman who technically owns the Witchblade—he's the one who had loaned it to the museum where it was on display. But, as Irons has learned the hard way, no man can wear the Witchblade. Irons bears the scars from where he's tried and the Witchblade has rejected him. But he is a man obsessed with the desire to control the Witchblade. He figures that the only way to control it is to control the woman who wears it.

Therefore, Irons' mission is to control Sara.

Cistaro talks about playing the role of Kenneth Irons: "I like the idea that just about anything that Irons says ... we're not really sure whether to believe him or not. We're not sure whether he's operating for the good or for the bad, although we see his villainous side more readily.

"I think it's my obligation to find those areas where he's more fleshed out—where he won't be just a stock villain. But there's his point of view and his perspective—there are reasons why he does what he does. He thinks he knows better than everyone else. It's kind of similar to Faust."

In a strange twist of serendipity, Cistaro has a very long and close history with *Witchblade*. Cistaro's college roommate was Brian Haberlin, who is one of the *Witchblade* comic book's co-creators. So when Cistaro was called in to audition for *Witchblade*, he was already familiar with the story and the characters, because he remembered hearing about them from Haberlin when *Witchblade* was no more than a concept.

"In the comic book, Irons' background is a little bit hazy," Cistaro says. "He's rumored to be about 90 years old. We don't really know how old he is. Even in this series, he appears in pictures with Kennedy. We'll see pictures from the '50s where he looks just the way he looks now. He's been around for quite some time.

"As far as his background, it's been rumored that he was certainly involved in many philanthropic endeavors. He's involved in many aspects of industry. It's rumored that he has made his fortune in the arms trade. He has a background of buying, selling, and developing weapons, but he also owns many companies. He owns a media conglomerate. He owns a research and development company.


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Sara uses the Witchblade to combat evil, in this case a gangster who murdered her friend. The Witchblade, which is permanently attached to Sara's wrist, turns into a sword or a gauntlet to protect her.

He's somebody who really has his finger in just about every aspect of financial matters—banking, all of that.

"As far as where he came from, the writers have chosen to keep that a little bit mysterious. In the comic book, originally, his father was an archaeologist. He's familiar with the Holy Grail, and all the great, great prizes of antiquity—and they all just pale in comparison to the terrible, wonderful, tantalizing powers of the Witchblade. This is his vocation."

There are moments in the series that can make you wonder exactly who or what Irons is. Is Irons human? Is he someone who has made a deal with the devil? Or could Irons even be the devil himself? At other times, despite his obsession to control Sara and therefore the Witchblade, it seems as if he and Sara might actually be on the same side. Is it possible that Irons is seeking to fight for justice, too?

Another interesting twist to Irons is his relationship with Ian Nottingham (played by Eric Etebari of TV's *413 Hope St.*). Nottingham is a strange young man who is at the beck and call of Irons.

Cistaro describes this unusual relationship between Irons and Nottingham: "Sometimes it seems like a parent/child [relationship], sometimes it seems like a teacher/pupil, sometimes it seems that it's a master/servant, sometimes it seems that it's a creator/Frankenstein situation—and I think all of those should be pregnant in that relationship. I think what's really interesting is that Nottingham is an absolute perfect instrument for Irons' destruction, as well as providing protection for him, as well as being his all-around valet. But what we're noticing as the show goes on—in fact, we even see it in the first couple of episodes—we're seeing the fact that Nottingham seems to be having a crisis of conscience. He seems to be having doubts about whether what Irons is doing is correct.

"The relationship that Irons has created with Nottingham is one of absolute trust to the extent that he expects Nottingham to do what he says and carry out his plan, because he knows what needs to happen next. Irons is very controlling and very much wants things to fall out in a certain sequence. Information to be revealed at a certain time.

"You can expect that in those areas where Nottingham starts to have doubt, without saying anything—and Irons can feel it, Irons can tell—the relationship is really one of control. I think Irons is going to try to rule Nottingham ultimately with fear and affection. And it's a very strange mix. Take away with one hand, give with the other. It's a very manipulative relationship, but it's one that has been the most fun for Eric and myself to be working with.

"And we certainly talk about how it develops. Eric has a Rottweiler here with him in Toronto [where the series is filmed]. It's a big, huge dog. Eric moves that dog around the room by his tone of voice, by a look, by raising a hand. And the dog could really cause damage to Eric. But because of the relationship that Eric has established with this dog, the dog acquiesces. And it's interesting, because we look at his relationship to his dog as far as how Irons and Nottingham relate. He's cribbed looks and gestures and moves from his dog, and I've cribbed them from Eric. I tell him sometimes, 'Whatever you do to that dog, remember I'm gonna do it to you in the next episode.' It's a lot of fun."

One of the tasks for the show's creators was to translate a comic book into a TV series. Executive producer, director, and writer Ralph Hemecker (*X-Files* and *Millennium*) talks about how the transition was made. "We use the comic book to get the essential DNA for the series. We've maintained a lot of the same elements from the comic book. The series is much more about the powers that the gauntlet gives to Sara Pezzini and less about the Witchblade itself.

"It's an interesting challenge to determine the tone of the show. We've created a very real-feeling environment so that the supernatural elements come across even more strongly than if the whole show had a supernatural flavor.

"The guys at Top Cow really created an intriguing, bizarre world, and we're trying to plumb that world as much as we can within the context of dealing in real time and space with real people, which is different than doing it on a flat page. The comic book

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offers a lot—it's a very rich broth to draw upon. I think that we're staying true to the essence of it, while changing it in some ways to make it work for television.

"One of the things that excites me about the show is that it really is unique. The combination of the subject matter, the characters, and the way the stories are told will really give audiences a different kind of episodic television experience. We've got great stories and a great cast. It's a very strange, very cool show."

Witchblade has something in common with *Babylon 5* in that each episode is carefully thought out as part of the greater whole. In other words, the more careful attention you pay to each episode, the greater the payoff in the long run.

Cistaro describes what it's like to be part of that process: "Although each episode certainly can stand up on its own, at the same time, the characters and their stories weave in and out of every episode. So you can have a character coming into episode 3 and it doesn't pay off until episode 5, 6, and 7. It's more than just a traditional series in that sense. That's what I really enjoy. The executive producer and the writers—even in rewrites, we can see that they're leaving themselves options. They're shifting, I think, as the characters present themselves in the dailies. It's very exciting to be part of this.

"There's special care and attention [taken] in every single department—props, costumes, makeup, hair—everybody is working with that thought in mind, putting in little details to enrich the overall texture. You'll notice a lot of literary references, historical references, and artwork references. I particularly enjoy working in that kind of atmosphere where it's all layered and it all means something. I haven't caught anything quite yet that was just sort of thrown in for effect that doesn't pay off later. If there's a character and that character disappears for no apparent reason, or if there's a reference to something—I think Irons makes some off-hand reference to Sara, 'Have you ever eaten monkeys' brains?'—it may take about eight episodes, but eventually, it'll come back around again."

Cistaro comments on the impact that the series' star has on the making of the show. "I can't imagine working with anybody who has the kind of gift and professionalism of Yancy Butler. This is someone who comes ready to work and creates such a terrific atmosphere on the set. She's a tremendous wit—as soon as somebody gets smart and recognizes that, they'll cast her in a comedy. She's just hilarious. And on top of that, this business tends to make women feel insecure—and she doesn't have any of that. She's confident and self-assured. It makes for a tremendous work atmosphere. It makes everyone want to work just that much harder.

"I'm so genuinely excited to be part of *Witchblade*. It's so creative on so many different levels." ❧

Fall 2001: TV Preview

The biggest news for the fall 2001 season is the move of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* from the WB to UPN. Despite Buffy's season-ending death on the show, Sarah Michelle Gellar is guaranteed to return and star in the title role, same time, same day, different channel. *Angel* remains on the WB but moves to Monday nights.



New TV series this fall promise to give us werewolves, comic book heroes, and a mid-season show based on a Stephen King novel.

CBS offers a new werewolf drama called *Wolf Lake*, starring Lou Diamond Phillips, Graham Greene, and Tim Matheson. Wolf Lake is a place of secrets, which a local sheriff decides to investigate. He faces the aftermath of a murder, missing hitchhikers, and local hunters who have barely survived serious animal bites. At the same time, wolves in the vicinity have been exhibiting strange behavior. It looks like those wolves may also be some of the residents who live in the sheriff's community.

Superman fans should look for *Smallville*, a new series on the WB. *Smallville* is an action-adventure drama that puts a new twist on the Superman mythology by focusing on Clark Kent's teen years as he comes of age in Smallville, Kansas. After a meteor shower brings Clark to Smallville, the town becomes the target of a never-ending stream of strange and unexplained happenings. Clark feels responsible, and his mission is to use his growing powers to stop the phenomena. The show promises state-of-the-art special effects.

FOX brings a live-action version of the comedy *The Tick* to its lineup. The show's creator is Ben Edlund (who also created *The Tick* comic book and the animated TV series), and the director is Barry Sonnenfeld (*Men in Black*). Patrick Warburton (*The Emperor's New Groove*, *Seinfeld*) stars as the big, blue hero.

Look for a new syndicated series, *Mutant X*, which is rumored to be committed to a full two-year run. *Mutant X* is an original action series about human mutants who are the results of a genetic experiment gone wrong. Five mutants escape the secret agency responsible for the experiment. The agency wants them back but has to find them first. John Shea (Lex Luthor on TV's *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*) stars as Adam, the leader and moral center of the mutants. The other mutants include a man who can alter his body's density, a woman who has both human and animal DNA, a woman who's an empath, and a man with an electric personality.



Rose McGowan joins the cast of Charmed *this fall.*

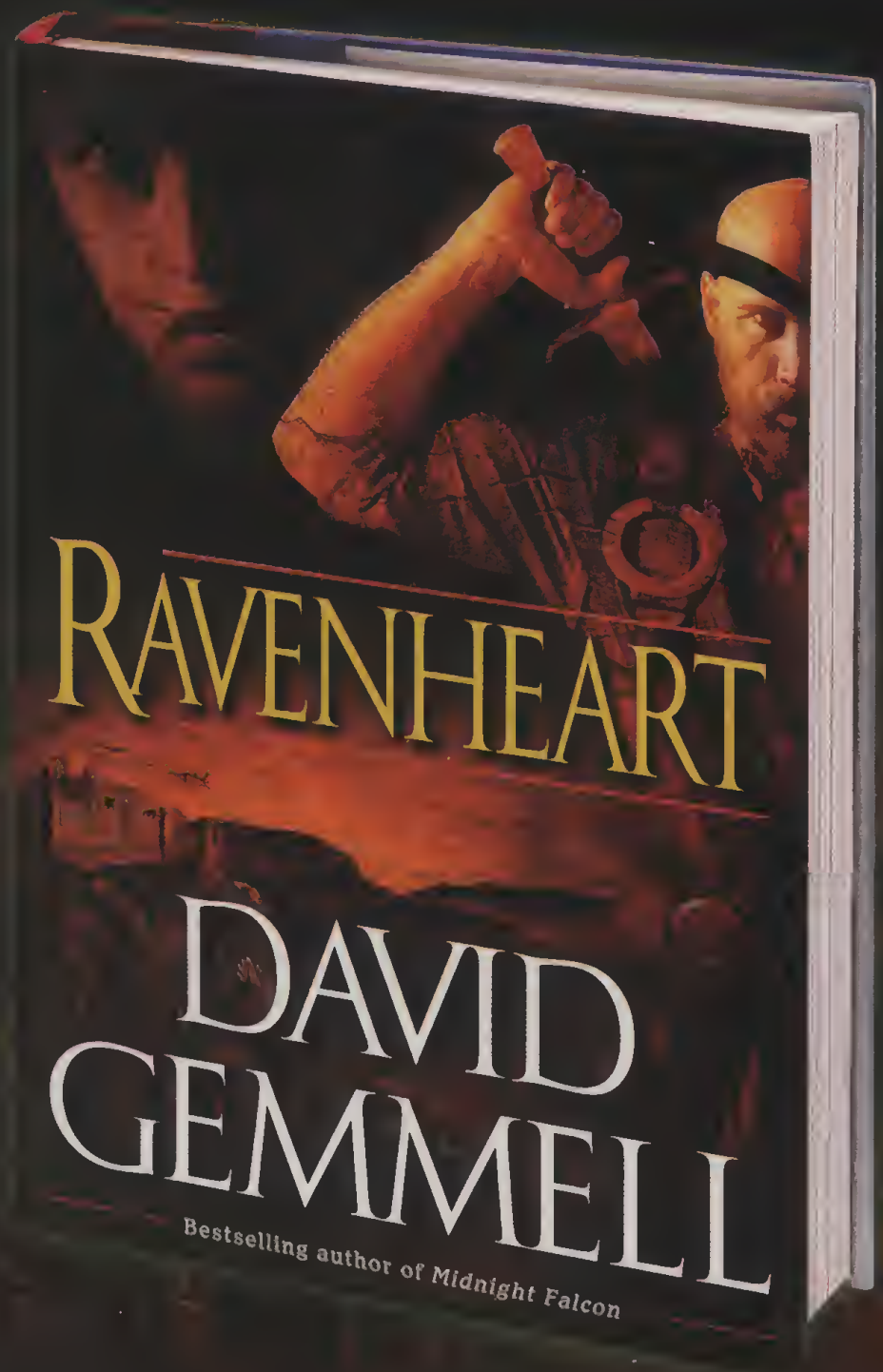
UPN has lined up a mid-season series based on Stephen King's *The Dead Zone*. When Johnny Smith (played by Anthony Michael Hall) wakes up from a six-year-long coma, he discovers that when he touches another person, he gets a sudden look into their past or future. His doctors claim he's having hallucinations. They say he's using a dormant part of the brain they call the "dead zone." As Johnny tries to piece his life back together, he decides to use his new-found psychic powers to help the people he touches.

Charmed and *Sabrina The Teenage Witch* return to the WB. *Mysterious Ways* begins its sophomore season on PAX. And look for *X-Files* to return to FOX, this time without David Duchovny.

At press time, the only syndicated fantasy show to be canceled is *Queen of Swords*, which makes it a good bet that *BeastMaster*, *The Lost World*, *Relic Hunter*, *Sheena*, and *The Immortal* are likely to return with new episodes this fall.

Resa Nelson

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By Resa Nelson

Edgar Allan Poe plumbs the depths of the unconscious mind.



Ever since the dawn of cinema, dozens of movies have been adapted from the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. The best series of adaptations star Vincent Price and capture the haunting atmosphere and spirit of Poe's short stories.

In the 1960s, legendary director and producer Roger Corman decided to adapt many of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories and poems for the cinema. In the *A&E Biography* of Vincent Price, Corman explained, "Just as Sigmund Freud, a little later in the century, was working on a scientific basis toward the concept of the unconscious, I thought Poe, as an artist, was doing the same thing—writing horror films from the standpoint of the unconscious mind. And I thought Vincent was able to understand that and to portray that."

Vincent Pnce began his acting career on stage when he was still in college. It was a career that spanned 55 years and included a hundred feature films, including such classics as *Laura* and *The Song of Bernadette.* Corman chose Price to star in the Poe adaptations because "he had an aura, as it were, of being a gentleman, and of being highly intelligent and sensitive, which were the qualities I was looking for."



Filmmakers have been attracted to Edgar Allan Poe's stories since the early days of movies. This is a detail from 1932's Murders in the Rue Morgue.

Price starred in seven of Corman's eight Poe adaptations (Ray Milland starred in the eighth, *The Premature Burial*). Although the Poe movies were originally considered "B" movies, they were very popular and well received, earning Corman international acclaim. After finishing the Corman series, Price went on to make two more Poe adaptations with other directors.

The Fall of the House of Usher (1960) features a screenplay by novelist and screenplay writer Richard Matheson (*The Incredible Shrinking Man, The Legend of Hell House, What Dreams May Come,* and *Stir of Echoes*). Adapting a Poe story must have been a tremendous feat since they often focus on the main character's thoughts, perceptions, and memories. His work revolves around atmosphere and the slow creation of tension, usually shown through the filter of one character's point of view, which may or may not be reliable. Matheson wrote many of the Poe adaptations for director Corman, and the strength of these adaptations lies in his success in finding a way to tell the story cinematically while at the same time staying true to many of the details of the story, the characters, and the atmosphere.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher,* a man named Phillip arrives at the house, looking for his fiancée, Madeline Usher. Phillip first meets Roderick Usher (played by Price), who requests that all guests remove their shoes and speak quietly. Roderick has a great sensitivity to sound. He explains that the Usher line is tainted and that both he and his sister are dying. Roderick claims that all Ushers have a morbid acuteness of all five senses, and that most of his ancestors went insane.

Madeline convinces Roderick to allow her financé, Phillip, to stay. However, the truth about the Ushers is gradually revealed. The house of

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Vincent Price attacks Barbara Steele in The Pit and the Pendulum.

Usher is not only coming apart at the seams, but it is the house itself that appears to have a problem with Phillip's presence. As Phillip tries to convince Madeline to leave the house, she struggles with what she thinks she can and can't do. One of the best of the Poe adaptations, *Usher* is rich in suspense and mystery.

The Pit and the Pendulum (1961) is a classic chiller. Adapted from Poe's short story by Matheson, the film begins when Englishman Francis Barnard arrives at a castle in Spain. The year is 1546, not too many years after the end of the Spanish Inquisition. Barnard has received word that his sister died unexpectedly, and he wants to pay his respects to her remains. Barnard quickly encounters Don Nicholas Medina (played by Price), his brother-in-law.

At the persistent urging of Barnard, Medina finally reveals what little he's willing to tell of his wife's death. He found her dying within the confines of the castle's torture chamber—the place where Medina's father, a member of the Spanish Inquisition, had tortured thousands of innocent people, years ago. Medina blames the castle's malignant atmosphere for the death of his wife.

As Barnard slowly gleans more details from Medina, strange things begin to happen, things that imply that either the ghost of Medina's wife is haunting the castle or that, somehow, she's still alive. Or maybe it's someone else who's intent on torturing Medina. As Barnard frantically attempts to help Medina unravel the puzzle, the past comes back to haunt them to an unusual but inevitable conclusion.

Tales of Terror (1962) is a delightful trilogy of Poe short stones that stars many of the finest horror actors of that era. All three stories were adapted by Matheson, who stays fairly true to their original tone and intent.

The first segment, "Morella," begins when a young woman from Boston arrives at what seems to be an abandoned house. When she knocks at the front door, she finds it's unlocked. Upon entering the house she finds it in disarray, covered in cobwebs and an occasional spider. She hears strange noises and goes u investigate. There, she's confronted (played by Price). She knows who h he doesn't recognize her. Not at firs

The woman is Lenora, Lock daughter. He doesn't recognize Leno because he hasn't seen her—or ha any contact with her—since he birth. Lenora's one wish is to have one good visit with her father. The mystery that unfolds centers on why Locke wants to have nothing to d with his own daughter.

"The Black Cat" is a delightful segment with a lot of broad humor Montresor Herringbone (played Peter Lorre) is a man who spends days drinking while his wife work support them both. When he runs money, Montresor wanders in desp failing at his attempts to beg. He onto a wine-tasting contest where lenges the best wine taster, Fortuna by Price). The two become friends and when Fortunato escorts Montre sparks fly between Fortunato and M wife. When Montresor figures o going on behind his back, some of striking images from Poe's work co on the screen.

"The Case of M. Valdemar" cente wishes of a dying man, Ernest (played by Price), to participate in the experiments of a hypnotist, Dr. Carmichael (played by Basil Rathbone). Valdemar is grateful to Dr. Carmichael for having used hypnosis to ease his pain. His willingness to be a guinea pig is an honest gesture to express that gratitude, but Dr. Carmichael is focused on what he wants—with no regard for Valdemar—and the experiments take on a horrific tone.

The Raven (1963) is based very loosely on Poe's famous poem. While it's one of Matheson's weaker adaptations, its cast is stellar—including a lead role played by a very young Jack Nicholson. This isn't so much a horror movie as it is a light fantasy with dated and sometimes silly humor. Still, it is worth a look.

The story begins with Dr. Erasmus Craven (played by Price) as he pines for his dead wife Lenore. A raven does come rapping on his chamber door (well, actually, his window), and Erasmus lets the bird inside. The raven begins a playful banter with Erasmus—the bird literally talks. Erasmus quickly figures out that what he's dealing with is a man who has been turned into a raven. He takes the bird downstairs to his dead father's laboratory. It turns out that not only was his father a magician, but Erasmus is one as well—a nonpracticing, reluctant magician.

Erasmus reverses the magic and turns the raven back into his true self: a fellow magician, Dr. Adolphus Bedlo (Peter Lorre). Adolphus informs Erasmus that his beloved wife



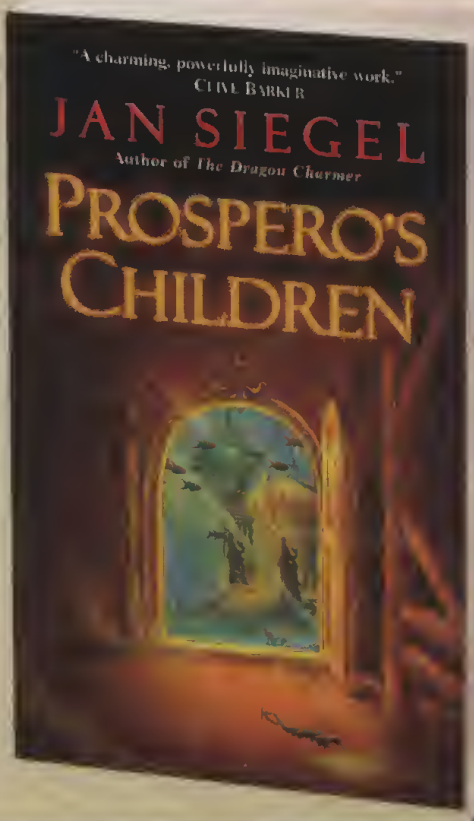
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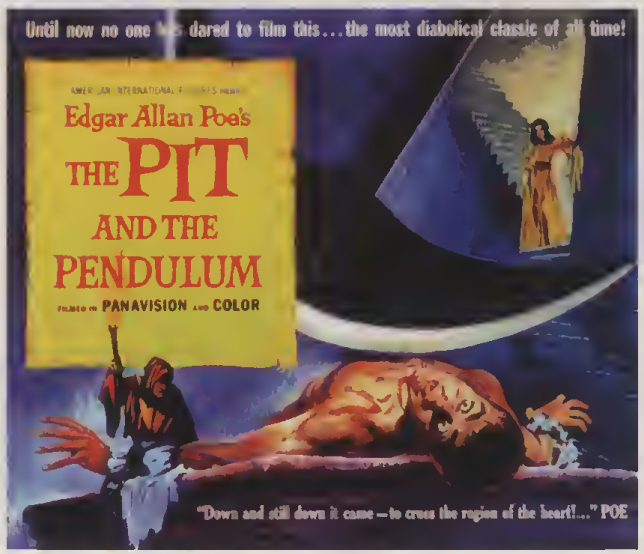


Lenore hasn't died. Instead, she's taken up with an evil magician, Dr. Scarabus (Boris Karloff). In a lark of an adventure, Erasmus, his daughter, Adolphus, and Adolphus's son (Nicholson) head off for the castle where they confront Dr. Scarabus and find out what's happened to Lenore.

The Haunted Palace (1963) gets its name from Poe's poem by the same name, which was published as part of the "The Fall of the House of Usher." In fact, *The Haunted Palace* is a Charles Beaumont (TV's *Rod Serling's The Twilight Zone*) adaptation of an H.P. Lovecraft story, "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward." Parts of Poe's poem are included at the beginning and end of the film.

The story begins in 1765 when the townspeople of Arkham, a New England village, descend on the haunted palace. It's the home of Joseph Curwen (played by Price), who is in the midst of what looks to be some kind of sacrifice of a young woman to something mysterious under the floor. The townspeople not only come pounding on his front door, they haul him outside, accuse him of being a warlock, and burn him alive. With his dying breath, Curwen places a curse on them all and vows vengeance.

One hundred and ten years later, Charles Dexter Ward (also played by Price) arrives in Arkham with his bride. They're the rightful owners of the long-deserted haunted palace. Dexter is, in fact, the grandson of Joseph Curwen. Aided by the palace's caretaker (played by Lon Chaney, Jr.), Dexter slowly unravels the truth about the curse on the town, the palace's monster, and his own grandfather.



Time *magazine called the film "cleverly Edgar Allan Poetic."*

The Masque of the Red Death (1964) may be the Poe adaptation that garnered director Corman the most attention for its vision and style. Cowritten by Charles Beaumont and R. Wright Campbell, it's a clever adaptation of two Poe stories: "The Masque of the Red Death" and "Hop-Frog," which is woven in as a subplot.

With something of a fairy tale tone, *Masque* begins when an old woman encounters a man cloaked in red in the forest. The man turns a white rose to red, then gives it to the woman with a warning for her village: Their day of deliverance is at hand. The red death is a plague that leaves its victims' faces pocked with blood.

Prince Prospero (played by Price) arrives in the woman's village. He invites the villagers, who work his crops and make him wealthy, to beg for scraps from his table at an upcoming feast. Two men from the village protest. They've received the old woman's message, and they assume it means that they will soon be delivered from the tyranny of Prospero. When Prospero orders both men to be killed, a young woman, Francesca, begs Prospero to spare their lives. One man is her father; the other is her lover. Prospero decides to make her choose between them—one man will live and the other will die.

But they're interrupted by the old woman's scream. When Prospero rushes into her nearby house to investigate, he discovers that the old woman is inflicted with the red death. Prospero orders his men to take Francesca, her father, and her lover to his castle—and to burn the village they leave behind.

Once he returns to his castle, Prospero invites the local nobles to seclude themselves there to escape the plague. While the plague spreads to the villages outside, the nobles party inside Prospero's walls. And Prospero uses Francesca, her father, her lover, and even some of his guests as sources of amusement. Prospero has a secret, but not even that secret can protect him from his ultimate fate.

The Tomb of Ligeia (1965) is based on the short story "Ligeia," which some claim was Poe's favorite. The short story is a first-person narrative of a man who misses his long-dead first wife, Ligeia, even after he marries his second wife, the Lady Rowena. The memory of Ligeia haunts him. Strange things begin to happen when Rowena becomes sick. Because the narrator admits to being an opium addict, it's unclear whether what he experiences is reality or only in his imagination.

Screenwriter Robert Towne (*Chinatown, The Last Detail, Shampoo, Mission: Impossible 1* and *2*) used details from "Ligeia" to create a story of the main character, Verden Fell (played by Price), and his meeting and marriage to his second wife, the Lady Rowena.

The Tomb of Ligeia begins with the burial of Ligeia among the ruins of an abbey in the year 1821. Fell describes his late wife as a woman

so strong-willed that she won't die. We later learn that Ligeia's last words to him were, "I will always be your wife."

Years later, Fell meets Lady Rowena at Ligeia's grave. By now, Fell has become withdrawn and morose. But the Lady Rowena is a bundle of personality, and she soon charms him. However, from the beginning, a black cat antagonizes Rowena at every step.

Fell discovers that Ligeia's date of death has vanished from her tombstone—and he admits he never knew her date of birth. Fell believes the disappearance of the date is a prophecy that Ligeia will return. After all, the words on her tombstone read, "Nor Lie in Death Forever." At the same time, Fell worries that he might have been the one who removed the date from Ligeia's tombstone, and that he's losing his mind. As more and more evidence crops up that Ligeia has returned from the dead, the story escalates to an interesting conclusion that's worthy of Poe.

The Conquerer Worm (1968) actually has little to do with Poe, other than its title. The movie begins and ends with lines from the poem that was originally published as part of Poe's short story "Ligeia." Directed by Michael Reeves, *The Conquerer Worm* is based loosely on the story of Matthew Hopkins (played by Price), an historical figure who was determined to eliminate witches from England in 1645. Although there's nothing supernatural in the story, it's still a horror movie. In fact, this is not a movie for the faint of heart or the faint of stomach.

Hopkins is chillingly portrayed as a man who abused the power given to him during a time of civil war between the Royalist Party of King Charles and the Roundheads, Oliver Cromwell's parliamentary party. Hopkins used his power for his own personal gain. He accused whoever he wished of witchcraft and tortured and ultimately killed them. While these scenes are vivid and disturbing, they seem authentic and true to historical accounts of witch hunts. Some critics also consider *The Conquerer Worm* (also known as *Matthew Hopkins: Witchhunter General*) to be among Price's best work.

The Oblong Box (1969), directed by Gordon Hessler, has nothing to do with the Poe short story by the same name, although it does focus on a theme explored by Poe—premature burial.

Set in 1865, the story is about Sir Julian Markham (played by Price), his brother Edward, and the fate that they must face as a result of their ill-gotten gains from the plantation they own in Africa. As the movie begins, the unfortunate Edward and Julian discover a witch doctor performing a frenzied tribal ceremony.

The brothers return to England, but Edward is now kept chained and shackled in an upstairs room in their mansion. Julian believes that Edward is insane but hates the idea of committing him to an asylum. Something has happened to his face, which is kept in the shadows or masked. Unknown to Julian, Edward plots an escape. He's made arrangements for an African witch doctor to concoct a sleeping potion for him. When Edward takes the potion, he's then pronounced dead. However, because Edward's face has been disfigured, Julian doesn't want anyone to find out about it. However, it's expected that Edward's body will lie in state for a certain period of time. Because this was a period when grave robbers delivered bodies to physicians performing research, Julian decides to make arrangements to get another body to replace Edward's. Things begin to go wrong when the man that Julian hires decides to kill Edward's replacement instead of robbing a grave.

Although Julian unwittingly buries his brother alive, Edward's coffin is quickly confiscated by grave robbers working for a local doctor. Once freed by the doctor, who's shocked to find him alive, Edward begins to plot his revenge against everyone who has wronged him.

The Oblong Box is a strong story about sin and karma, with plenty of twists and turns along the way, as well as characters who eventually face the wrongs they have committed.

So where can you find the Poe movies in which Price starred? Here's a handful of resources.

Video rental stores are a good place to start. Even major chains like Blockbuster carry the Poe movies—just be sure to check the date, director, or actors. For example, there are three versions of *The Masque of the Red Death*, made in 1964, 1989, and 1990. The Roger Corman/Vincent Price version was released in 1964. In fact, Blockbuster plans to provide the ability to search online for videos at the store of your choice; check www.blockbuster.com for details.

Possibly the best resource is your local library, especially if it is part of a network of libraries. Most libraries have good video collections, and they're very likely to include these Poe adaptations. If your library belongs to a network, you may be able to request videos on inter-library loan from other branches. Although many libraries hesitate to loan videos to other libraries, they often will if that library belongs to the same network.

You can find many of the Poe movies on television. One of the best Web sites for finding out when a specific movie will air on television is search.tv.yahoo.com, which allows you to search for movie titles scheduled to air within the next 7 to 14 days.

Many cable channels, ranging from AMC to Showtime to USA Networks and SCI FI, have acquired the rights to air Poe movies.

AMC's Web site offers the ability to check the AMC schedule on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Check www.amctv.com and look at its On The Air section.

If you're a collector, many of the Poe movies (as well as *A&E's Biography* of Vincent Price) are available on video or DVD.



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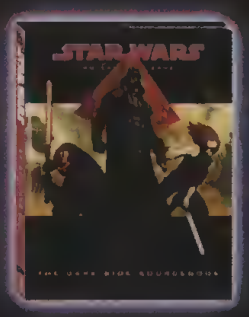
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By Gahan Wilson

Jeff VanderMeer introduces the strange and ancient city of Ambergris.

It is extremely appropriate that I have neither seen nor handled a copy of ***City of Saints & Madmen: The Book of Ambergris*** by Jeff VanderMeer (Cosmos Books <saw@neo.rr.com>, trade paperback; 240 pp.; $15.00). I think there is a good chance the thing actually does exist, since its publication date is July 2001, but all I have had to go on is a precious little collection of small press books ("Dradin in Love"; "The Early History of Ambergris," and the final issue of *Inside the Palace*, a literary magazine which contains "The Transformation of Martin Lake"), the typewritten manuscripts of its highly perceptive and deservedly laudatory introduction by Michael Moorcock, and the typwritten, up-to-now unpublished manuscript of its final story, "The Strange Case of X."



Stunning paintings and drawings by Gary Gianni enhance the definitive edition of Robert Howard's Bran Mak Morn, The Last King.

Also, I have not seen its cover (I gather it is in full color and done by Scott Eagle), but you may be looking at it now, reproduced within or in the vicinity of this article, if the book's publisher succeeded in either expressing or electronically sending a reproduction of it to the editors of this magazine and they decided to print it.

It is appropriate, as I say, because it all amounts to an almost perfect real-life representation of the style Jeff VanderMeer employs to reveal his truly wonderful creation, the strange and ancient city of Ambergris, and to acquaint readers with an enormous range of odd events which have taken place within its boundaries.

There is a lot of straightforward narration, to be sure, and I assure you that every bit of it is extremely well written, but you are constantly finding yourself lured by the author into puzzling out important details via footnotes or other asides quoting widely varied sources ranging from critical essays to ancient histories to scraps of popular song. The reader is presented with a huge amount of complex material and is expected to sort it out, and he or she may balk at first, but the stuff presented is insidiously addictive and pulls him or her deeper and deeper into a personal exploration of Ambergris (it becomes a very private thing) by apparent contradictions or real contradictions or pause-producing insights or startlingly nasty and/or beautiful revelations.

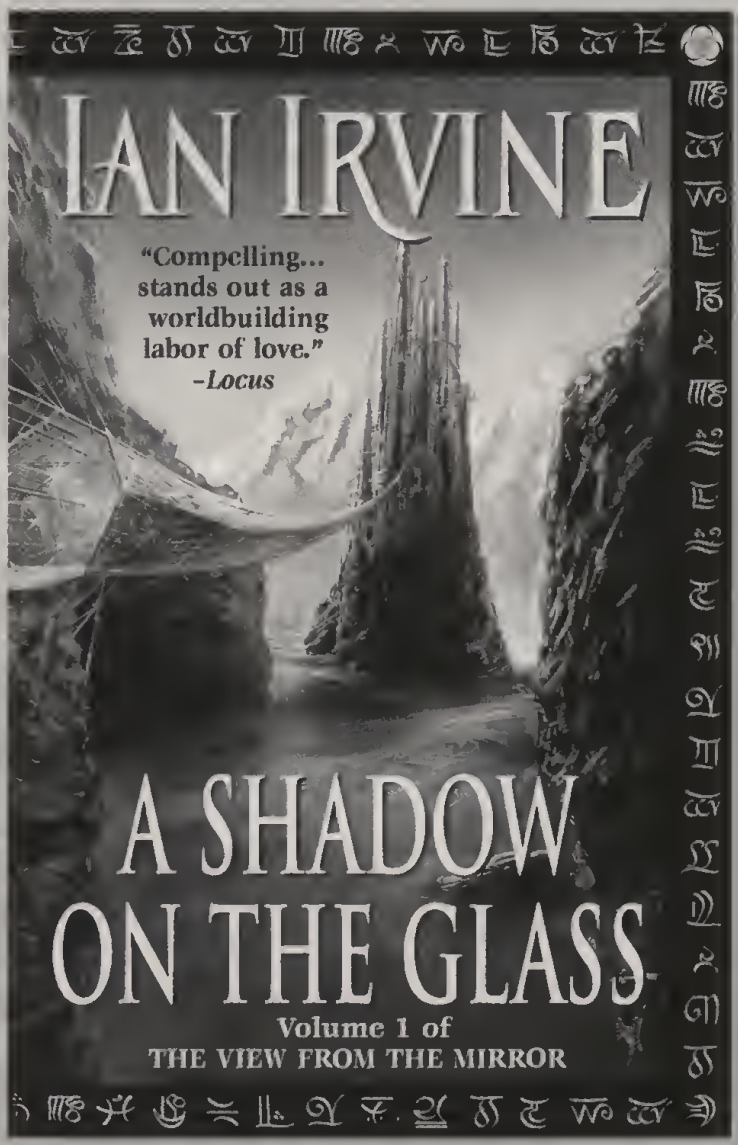
"Dradin in Love" eases you into all of this with an account of a very Poe-esquian sort of hero, Dradin Kashmir, a deeply disillusioned and sadly impoverished missionary who has fled the jungle and its unsatisfying conversions and is in the process of wandering the streets of decadent Ambergris in search of some new and perhaps more rewarding path when he has the very great misfortune to glance into an upstairs window of the building housing Hoegbotton & Sons, Distributors (a firm which plays a hugely important role throughout these writings), sees a beautiful secretary taking dictation from a machine, and tumbles instantly and helplessly in love.

He conceives a pathetic plan to interest the secretary, puts it into action with the help of

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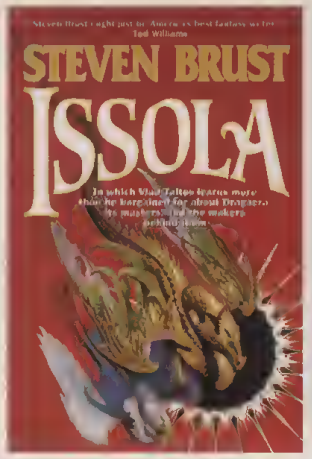
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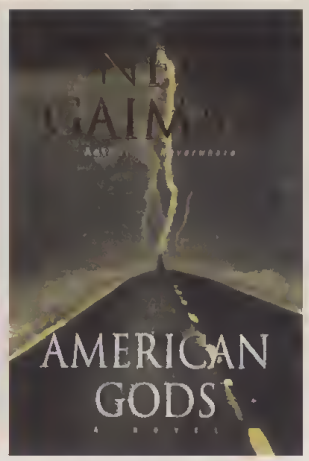
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a singularly sinister tattooed sidewalk knife dealer, and as he reels deeper and deeper into danger and confusion, we become more and more familiar with, and fascinated by, the weird complexities and bottomless mysteries of Ambergris, the strange old city by the River Moth.





There is, for example, the Festival of the Freshwater Squid, a sort of deadly Mardi Gras hauntingly and horrifically portrayed; there are extremely spooky encounters with the gray caps: creepy and dangerous little night creatures that feed on offal and occasional unfortunate wanderers and whose soft, broad hats help make them strongly resemble the thriving fungi so often encountered in the town; wanderings in the religious quarter with its many varied temples and towers, and of course the multitudinous delights and temptations of Albumuth Boulevard with its sparkling shops, restaurants, and cafés, not to mention its trickier and darker temptations.

Your curiosity having been whetted, the author then presents "The Early History of Ambergris" by Duncan Shriek, which is along the same lines as the straight-faced but witty essays Howard Phillips Lovecraft now and then tossed out—most notably in his "History of the Necronomicon." VanderMeer's work is a wonderfully mad expansion of the form. It goes for nearly a hundred pages in the printing I have at hand and is scrupulously elaborated with all the trimmings of a scholarly essay, including huge numbers of lengthy footnotes, disparaging remarks concerning the theories and deductions of other experts in the field, helpful little sketches from ancient carvings (my favorite showing a bearded Haragck inflating an animal skin and then using it to float on water), and quotations from the ancients indicating they were pretty bad poets. A fantastic document.

The book concludes with two very different stories, each one in its own way greatly expanding our understanding and savoring of dear old Ambergris.

The first of these is "The Transfor-mation of Martin Lake" and concerns the town's rich and thriving Bohemian life and reveals the horrifying secret truth behind a number of very public things including the aesthetic relationship between Ambergris's best-known painter, the eponymous Martin Lake, and its greatest composer of music, Voss Bender. It has a lot of sad but wise things to say about being an artist.

The final story is "The Strange Case of X," and I would be ill advised—actually, I should be taken out and shot—if I were to spoil it and the perfect way it ends the book by giving you any hint at all of what it's about.

I think a good way to end this review would be to quote the final comments in Michael Moorcock's introduction: "Make the most of the tapes-



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try of tales and visions before you. It is a rare treasure, to be tasted with both relish and respect. It's what you've been looking for."

A pleasing expansion to your experience of *Ambergris* would be ***The Exchange*** by Jeff VanderMeer (as Nicholas Sporlender; illustrated by Louis Verden; http://www.vandermeer.redsine.com; deluxe edition, $20.00 postpaid; regular edition, $6.99), a small, darkish box which is an exact duplicate of the box you would find left by the management of the Hoegbotton Royale Safe House, should you be so foolishly adventuresome as to visit the old city during the time of the Festival of the Freshwater Squid.

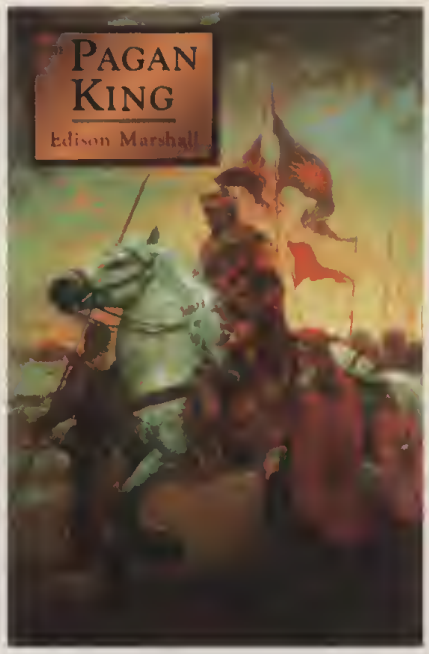


Not only does the box contain a friendly letter of advice from the management of the Safe House, one Festival pamphlet, and a little booklet containing a short but thoroughly gruesome Ambergris tale together with a number of very handsome illustrations, it gives you a sensible out should you actually wander the streets and encounter roaming gray caps (it includes a painless deadly mushroom to be chewed and swallowed, plus another mushroom providing its antidote if by some fluke you manage to escape) and (for identity purposes should the gray caps prove to be intractable) an easy-to-swallow metal Porfal Memory Capsule containing a slip of paper on which you can write your name. A votive candle is also provided for obvious reasons.

Not for the faint of heart.

It is always a pleasure to see a new book come along from Neil Gaiman, particularly as they seem to keep getting better and better, but this one struck me as being a really extra-special treat.

American Gods (William Morrow, NYC; hardcover; 461 pp.; $26.00) takes an intriguing notion which has been played with before (to make sure you know he knows you know that, he starts out with an amusing quote from a folkloric historian), but Gaiman gives it a huge forward push from all the predecessors I've experienced and expands on the theme with amazing imagination and virtuosity.



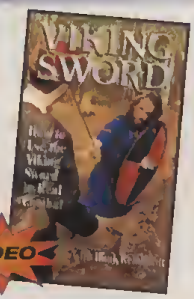
The idea simply is that when people come to America, they don't just bring their customs and recipes and new tonalities for what we do with English, they also bring their spirits and imps and, best of all, their gods.

One of the completely new, bright enlargements he brings to this is that the process began way, way before Ellis

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Island, or Columbus, or even good old Leif Eriksson. The earliest arrival mentioned in this book is that of the great god Thoth, who turned up on our shores 3,530 years ago ("give or take"), sailing on a reed boat along with a bunch of particularly hard-working Egyptian traders. I'm able to give you that exact figure because it comes from the old fellow himself who eventually became a Mr. Ibis who currently runs an old-timey family funeral home in Cairo (pronouced *Kay*-Roh) in southern Illinois along with a dog-faced chap named Jaquel (pronouced "Jackal") down in Little Egypt and "3,530 years ago, give or take" came from his lips.

I also learned from *American Gods* that Cairo got called Cairo and the area around it Little Egypt because it's located on the delta of the Mississippi and the Ohio as the Egyptian Cairo is located on the delta of the Nile. I've long puzzled over how those hard-scrabble farmers settled on all those exotic names. I've got a whole bunch of relatives down there who could have told me about it when I was a little kid and didn't (it may well be that they, too,



had no idea), so I'm here to let you know this book is packed with solid and usable information.

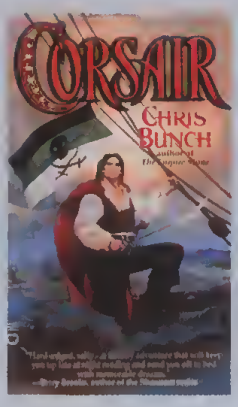
The story starts when a large man named Shadow (who got the name from his habit of silently following adults around as a lonely child so that he could have their company) is released from prison after a stretch he earns from being a bad burglar only to learn in swift succession that his wife, Laura, died in a car accident; that she died committing oral sex with his best friend who was driving; and that the best friend was also killed on account of having been distracted by the oral sex and would therefore not be around to give Shadow the job he had promised to give him when he got out of the slammer.

Having thus been put entirely at loose ends, Shadow finds it hard to resist when he encounters Wednesday—a smooth, one-eyed con man who clearly has mysterious powers at his command—who offers him a job out of the blue at very good terms to be his driver, flunky, and, if the situation really seems to call for it, strong-arm man.

He has hardly accepted the offer when his new employer introduces him to a tricky-looking tall guy with smart-assed sayings printed on his shirt and cap who claims he is a leprechaun and then picks a fight, which is obviously

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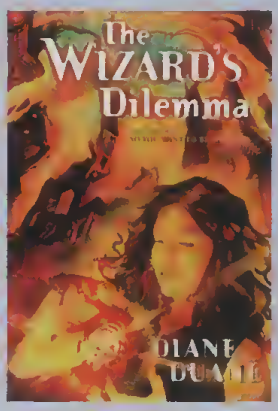
The Pagan King, by Edison Marshall, Green Knight Publishing, $14.95. The Pendragon fiction line offers reprints of long-unavailable classics as well as new and inventive fantasies. This novel was first published in 1959 and explores the Welsh roots of Arthurian legend. This stirring tale of Arthur explores the glories of the romantic legend contrasted with the bleakness of reality. The wilds of Britain, the prophecies of the mysterious "Song of Camlon," and the historically accurate depiction of the harsh realities of the time make for a classic tale with less room for magic. This version is not of the Lerner and Loewe variety. Instead, true fans of Arthurian legend and of history will revel in this re-telling of a kingdom sliding "inexorably into the Dark Ages" and the noble and naive youth, a "rustic of Taff," who leads the ultimately doomed resistance.



Exiled from Camelot, by Cherith Baldry, Green Knight Publishing, $14.95. A tale driven by the force of King Arthur's illegitimate son, Loholt—Pendragon fiction offers another tale of Camelot. A remarkable story wherein author Baldry seems to "delight in restoring Sir Kay to the position he so rightly deserves." Readers will thrill to this medieval murder mystery involving betrayals and renewals. Sir Kay must forge an uneasy alliance with the renegade called Briant and his lover, the enchantress Brisane. Will the exiled Sir Kay be able to win back the court's trust—or will evil and mayhem prevail?

Corsair, by Chris Bunch, Warner Aspect paperback, $6.99. A tale of the swashbuckling captain called Gareth Radnor. His command of the carrack *Steadfast,* and of destiny itself, make for a riveting story of adventure and misadventure. Gareth, son of a wizard, must leave his home and take to the high seas. A berth on a slaver, a crew of the strong, the magic and the beautiful … vengeance against the evil Linyati—all come together and will enthrall and entertain lovers of high adventure and exotic fantasy. By the acclaimed author of *The Seer King* and *The Empire Stone.*

The Wizard's Dilemma, by Diane Duane, a Harcourt hardcover, $17.00. This is the fifth book in the Young Wizard Series. Author of four previous *New York Times* bestsellers, Duane returns herein with a magical tale sure to delight the youngest reader in your house. The oldest readers will be enthralled as well. Wizardly partnerships are falling apart, Nita Callahan's mother has fallen ill, friendships are asunder, and family relationships are "practically useless" for the magic needed to make Nita's mother well again. Will she have to call upon the ONE she has devoted her life to fighting? Dire circumstances may call for drastic action. A charming and clever tale for all fans of the series and all fans-to-be …



Redgunk Tales, by William R. Eakin, Invisible Cities Press, $14.95. Editor Shawna McCarthy calls Bill Eakin "Sort of like Thomas Wolfe on acid, or James Joyce on moonshine …" *Realms* is proud to have been the first to publish the Redgunk stories. Herein is a collection subtitled "Apocalypse and Kudzu from Redgunk, Mississippi." These are words that take the rhythms, the heat, the mud, the cicadas, and the kudzu of the South and turn them into stories that touch your heart while messing with your brain stem … swamp gas, lawnmower fumes, cable television repair men, mythic worlds older than Greece, made-to-order alien mates, ghosts, and genetic experiments gone awry "people" the sensory tales within this collection. Because "real people, real heart and the absolute beauty of being human" is what it all comes to in the end ❧

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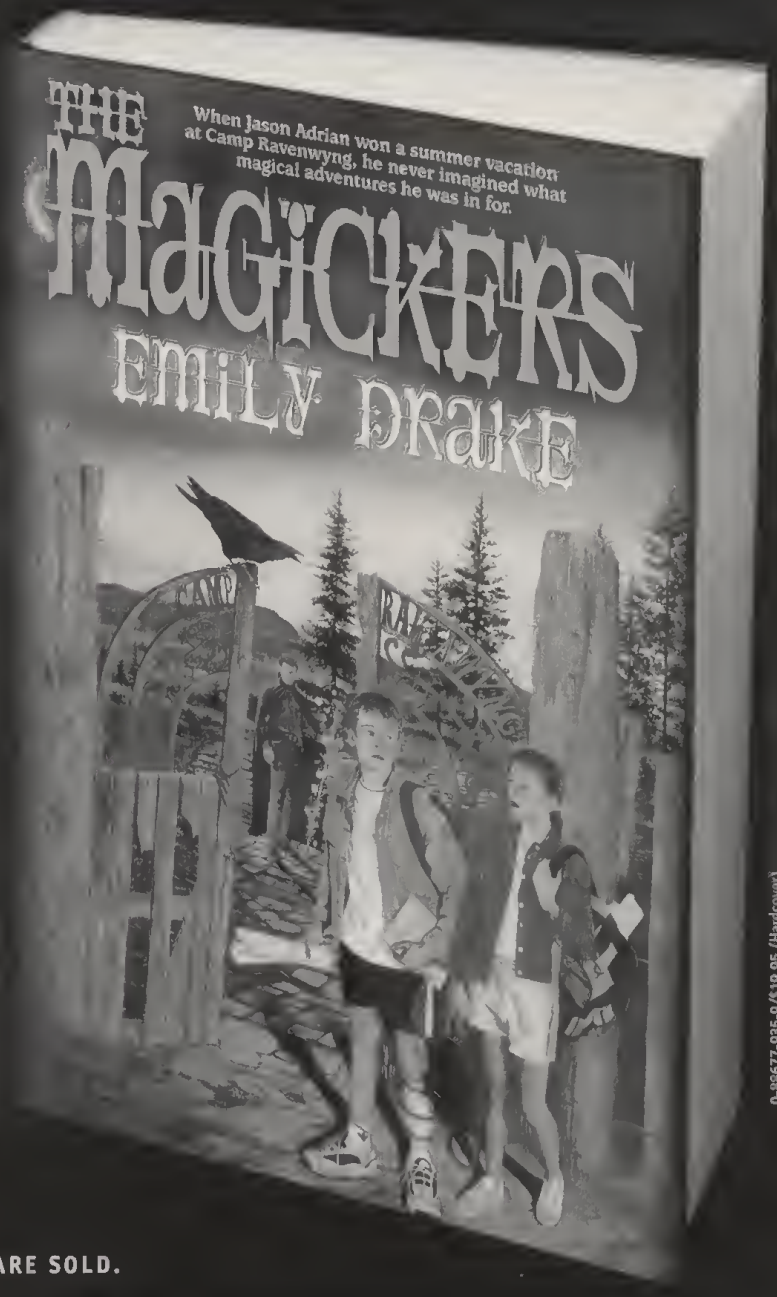
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an arranged test. When Shadow wins it with flying colors, he and Wednesday—whom we now realize is the god Odin (though I had twigged to that right off because I knew Wednesday is really Woden's day since I know all our days of the week are named either after gods or celestial bodies! Have you noticed that?)—are off to Chicago, and you will have a marvelous time reading about their visit with a tough Russian who claims to have cracked a lot of skulls and his three fortune-telling sisters who, of course, are also gods.

You will love the four of them, but probably mostly you will love the oldest sister, Polunochnya, who was born at midnight (the others were born at dawn and dusk) and who is no good at telling fortunes because she cannot lie and who is kind enough to tell Shadow the wisest thing you can ask the dead. That turns out to be very handy, but I won't tell you why because that would spoil a swell surprise Gaiman has arranged for you.

I expect you will love all the gods, or at least the old ones, the ones who came along with the immigrants from the ancient places. You may find it difficult to love some of the new gods, however, the ones who are currently getting most of the attention now we have got settled into this huge country and are worshipping new ways of life: the TV gods, the mall gods, the gods behind the matte black helicopters, and the nerdy technical gods being driven around in the dark rear seats of their limousines. Some of you will doubtless find that some of those gods are very hard to love.

But you will unabashedly love the book, that I'm sure of. It's a romp from start to finish, albeit occasionally troubling and sometimes even a tad depressing, but I guess that is true of any really interesting romp intelligently observed.

Also, even though it's all about confidence games and sleight-of-hand tricks, it's a very honest book and full of extremely kind and genuinely helpful advice.

It'll do you good to read it.

And here is even more good news: The people at Wandering Star have followed up their really magnificent production of Robert Howard's *Solomon Kane,* illustrated so marvelously by Gary Gianni with an equally spectacular book on the other of Howard's two darkest heroes, also lavishly illustrated by Gianni: ***Bran Mak Morn, The Last King*** (Wandering Star, London, England; 285 pp.; trade edition, $40.00; limited slipcase edition, $125.00).

This book gathers together in one

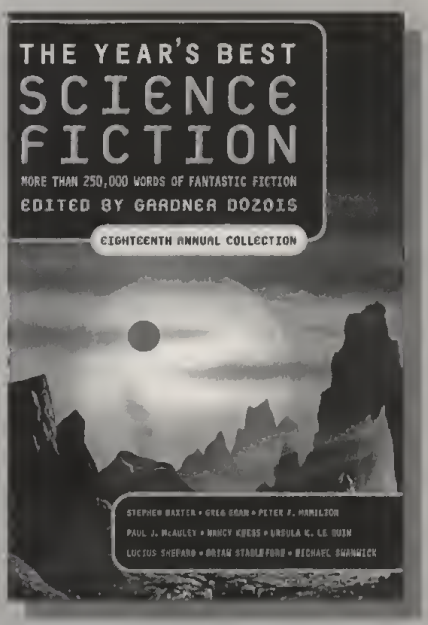
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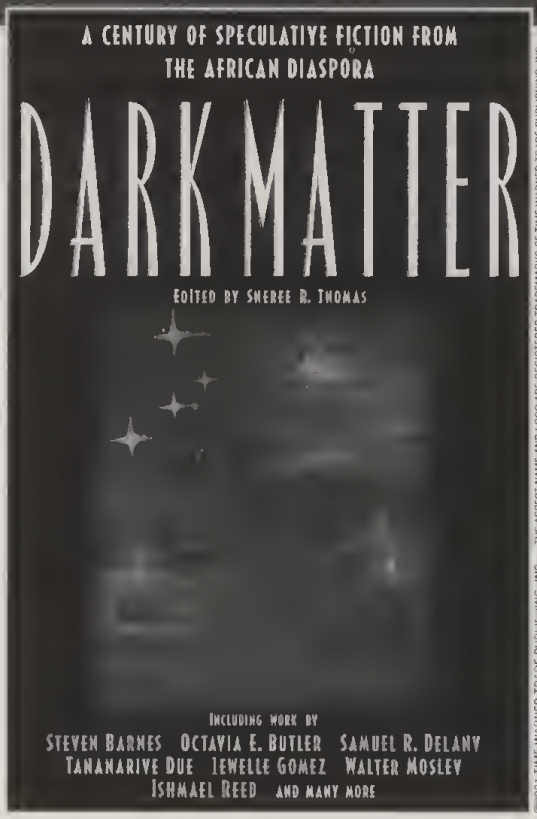
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volume a truly extraordinary assemblage of Howard's writings on his gutsy Pict hero. It's the sort of fascinating collection you ordinarily only have a chance to look over if you're lucky enough to visit a dedicated collector who is kind enough to let you view his secret trove.

There are not only absolutely all of the stories and poems about Bran and his Picts here, there are also synopses and first drafts and even reproductions of written and typed manuscripts. The appendices alone contain enough letters and essays and other such treasures to make this book a highly desirable collector's item and an absolute delight to anyone seriously interested in Howard.

One excellent feature of the book is the highly informative introduction by Rusty Burke which details Howard's lifelong fascination with the Picts—defined by Howard as the "small, dark Mediterranean aborigines of Britain"—and pointing out that while many of his other characters would run for a stretch in his work and then just disappear (there's a wonderful quote given by Burke from a letter Howard wrote to Clark Ashton Smith saying that it was as if "the man himself had been standing at my shoulder directing my efforts, and had suddenly turned and gone away, leaving me to search for another character"), the Picts persisted in his writing throughout his career and figured in numerous adventures concerning other heroes such as Conan.

The short foreword by Gianni very astutely and precisely nails the element in the Bran Mak Morn stories which has always made them my particular favorites; the ones which haunt and linger more than all the rest. "It's the quality of pathos. Compassion is an element generally not associated with Howard. Here he transcends the fantasy and the heroics he's known for by creating genuine sympathy for his noble Picts, the dark men who overcome all obstacles by their courage but are finally themselves overcome by fate."

Of course the drawings and paintings by Gianni are superb. I think they're even better than the ones he did for the Kane book, probably because he's gotten even better at his art (which is saying quite a lot!) and also because these stories are deeper than the Kane ones and have much more resonance, many more echoes.

The cover is a fine example. It shows Bran Mak Morn in his crown standing by the side of a road looking grimly ahead to God knows where with one fist to his chest and the other leaning on a hard, dry rock. Bare mountains

stretch behind him, a glaring sun's either setting or rising in the sky above him, and a long, struggling line of tired, heavily burdened Picts are slogging along before him, heading where he gazes. I swear you can hear the shuffling, the whimpers of the babies, and the sighs of the warriors.

Another is an interior color illustration for "Worms of the Earth" showing Bran about to give what's left of Titus Sulla the mercy stroke as the Witch and the Worms look on. It may be the best moment in all of Howard, and I've seen a few good tries at illustrating it, and many not so good, but I never saw one which I thought had got it right. Until now. Again, from his foreword, Gianni nails it: "I will try to leave Robert E. Howard's shadowy figures to your imagination." Thus speaks an artist.

OK, you say you're bored? You say you can't figure out what to do with the weekend? You say you're sick and tired of the piddly crap they show on TV and the dumb shows they're playing at the movies and you'd like a little real entertainment?

I got it for you, friend, two big, fat books full of it, a total of one thousand, one hundred and twenty-three pages crammed to bursting with it: ***The Conan Chronicles, Volumes 1 and 2*** (*Vol. 1: The People of the Black Circle*; Gollancz, London; paperback, 548 pp.; £6.99; *Vol. 2: The Hour of the Dragon*; Gollancz, London; paperback, 575 pp.; £7.99), pure unadulterated Conan as written by none other than Robert E. Howard himself with all the additions and supposed improvements contributed by other authors in previous editions skillfully edited out by Stephen Jones building on the work of Karl Edward Wagner. And there are excellent and helpful afterwords in both volumes written by Jones.

Yes, dear readers, I do think the Kane and Kull stories are the masterpieces of Howard's *ouevre*, but when I opened Volume 1 of *The Conan Chronicles*, I've got to admit I couldn't stop freaking reading until I'd hit the last page of Volume 2.

So sue me.

Gahan Wilson

Everybody Has Somebody in Heaven, *by Avram Davidson; Devora Publishing, NY; hardcover, 285 pp.; $24.95.*

Nonpareil Fantasist Avram Davidson left our world—a world he magnified and enhanced with glimmering tales constructed according to his peculiar slant of intelligence and vision—in 1993. But since then he's been well served by a host of loyal friends determined to keep his work alive. First came *The Avram*

Continued on page 94



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BIG CITY LITTLES

By Charles de Lint

FAITH, HOPE, AND CHARITY ARE ALL VIRTUES, AND SOMETIMES IT CAN BE DIFFICULT—YET ESSENTIAL—TO TELL THEM APART.

The Fates seem to take a perverse pleasure out of complicating our lives. I'm not sure why. We do such a good job of it all on our own that their divine interference only seems to be overkill.

It's not that we deliberately set out to screw things up. We'd all like to be healthy and happy, not to mention independently wealthy—or at least able to make our living doing something we care about, something we can take pride in. But even when we know better, we invariably make a mess of everything, both in our private and our public lives.

Take my sister. She knows that boyfriends are only an option, not an answer, but that's never stopped her from bouncing from one sorry relationship to another, barely stopping to catch her breath between one bad boy and the next. But I should talk. It's all well and fine to be comfortable in your own skin, to make a life for yourself if there's no one on the scene to share it with you. But too often I still feel like the original spinster, doomed to end her days forever alone in some garret.

I guess for all the strides we've made with the women's movement, there are some things we can still accept only on an intellectual level. We never really believe them in our hearts.

Illustration by Web Bryant



THE LITTLE MAN SITTING ON SHERI PIPER'S pillow when she opened her eyes was a good candidate for the last thing she would have expected to wake up to this morning. He wasn't really much bigger than the length from the tip of her middle finger to the heel of her palm, a small hamster-sized man, dressed in raggedy clothes with the look of a bird about him. His eyes were wide set, his nose had a definite hook to it, his body was plump, but his limbs were thin as twigs. His hair was an unruly tangle of short, brown curls and he wore a pair of rectangular, wire-framed eyeglasses not much different than those Sheri wore for anything but close work.

She tried to guess his age. Older than herself, certainly. In his mid-forties, she decided. Unless tiny people aged in something equivalent to dog years.

If this were happening to one of the characters in the children's books she wrote and illustrated, now would be the time for astonishment and wonder, perhaps even a mild touch of alarm, since after all, tiny though he was, he was still a strange man and she had woken up to find him in her bedroom. Instead, she felt oddly calm.

"I don't suppose I could be dreaming," she said.

The little man started the way a pedestrian might when an unexpected bus suddenly roars by the corner where he's standing. Jumping up, he lost his balance and would have gone sliding down the long slope of her pillow if she hadn't slipped a hand out from under the bedclothes and caught him.

He squeaked when she picked him up, but she meant him no harm and only deposited him carefully on her night table. Backing away until he was up against the lamp, his tiny gaze darted from side to side as though searching for escape, which seemed odd considering how, only moments ago, he'd been creeping around on her pillow mere inches from her face.

Laying her head back down, she studied him. He weighed no more than a mouse, but he was definitely real. He had substance the way dreams didn't. Unless she hadn't woken up yet and was still dreaming, which was a more likely explanation.

"Don't talk so loud!" he cried as she opened her mouth to speak again.

His voice was high pitched and sounded like the whine of a bug in her ear.

"What are you?" she whispered.

He appeared to be recovering from his earlier nervousness. Brushing something from the sleeve of his jacket, he said, "I'm not a what. I'm a who."

"Who then?"

He stood up straighter. "My name is Jenky Wood, at your service, and I come to you as an emissary."

"From where? Lilliput?"

Tiny eyes blinked in confusion. "No, from my people. The Kaldewen Tribe."

"Who live … where? In my sock drawer? Behind the baseboards?"

Why couldn't this have happened *after* her first coffee of the morning when at least her brain would be slightly functional.

He gave her a troubled look. "You're not like we expected."

"What were you expecting?"

"Someone … kinder."

Sheri sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm not a morning person."

"That's apparent."

"Mind you, I do feel justified in being a little cranky. After all, you're the one who's come barging into my bedroom."

"I didn't barge. I crept in under the door, ever so quietly."

"OK, snuck into my bedroom then—which, by the way, doesn't give you points on any gentlemanly scale that I know of."

"It seemed the best time to get your attention without being accidentally stepped on, or swatted like a bug."

Sheri stopped herself from telling him that implying that her apartment might be overrun with bugs his size also wasn't particularly endearing.

"Would it be too much to ask *what* you're doing in my bedroom?" she asked. "Not to mention on my bed."

"I might as well ask what you're doing in bed."

"Now who's being cranky?"

"The sun rose hours ago."

"Yes, and I was writing until 3 o'clock this morning so I think I'm entitled to sleep in." She paused to frown at him. "Not that it's any of your business. And," she added as he began to reply, "you haven't answered my question."

"It's about your book," he said. "*The Travelling Littles.*"

As soon as he said the title, she wondered how she could have missed the connection. Jenky Woods, at her service, looked exactly like she'd painted the Littles in her book. Except …

"Littles aren't real," she said, knowing how dumb *that* sounded with an all-too-obvious example standing on her night table.

"But … you … you told our history. …"

"I told a story," Sheri said, feeling sorry for the little man now. "One that was told to me when I was a girl."

"So you can't help us?"

"It depends," she said, "on what you need my help for."

But she already knew. She didn't have to go into her office to take down a copy of the book from her brag shelf. She might have written and illustrated it almost 20 years ago. She might not have recognized the little man for what he was until he'd told her himself. But she remembered the story.

It had been her first book and its modest, not to mention continuing, success was what had persuaded her to try to make a living at writing and drawing children's books. She'd just never considered that the story might be true, never mind what she'd said in the pages of the book.

THERE ARE MANY SORTS OF LITTLE PEOPLE—TINY FOLK, NO BIGGER THAN A MINUTE. AND I DON'T MEAN JUST FAIRIES AND BROWNIES.

THE TRAVELLING LITTLES

There are many sorts of little people—tiny folk, no bigger than a minute. And I don't just mean fairies and brownies, or even pennymen and their like. There are the Lilliputians that Gulliver met on his travels. Mary Norton's Borrowers. The Smalls of William Dunthorn's Cornwall. All sorts. But today I want to tell you about the Travelling Littles who live like gypsies, spending their lives always on the move.

This is how I heard the story when I was a small girl. My grandpa told it to me, just like this, so I know it's true.

The Littles were once birds. They had wings and flew high above the trees and hills to gather their food. When the leaves began to turn yellow and red and frost was in the air, they flew to warmer countries, for they weren't toads to burrow in the mud, or bears to hibernate away the cold months, or crows who don't allow the weather to tell them where to live, or when to move.

The Littles liked to travel. They liked the wind in their wings and to look out on a new horizon every morning. So they were always leaving one region for another, travelling more to the south in the winter, coming back north when the lilacs and honeysuckle bloomed. No matter how far they travelled, they always returned to these very hills where the sprucey-pine grow tall and the grass can seem blue in a certain light, because even travelling people need a place they can call home.

But one year when the Littles returned, they could find nothing to eat. They flew in every direction looking for food. They flew for days with a gnawing hunger in their bellies.

Finally they came upon a field of ripe grain—the seeds so fat and sweet, they'd never seen the like, before or since. They swooped down in a chorusing flock and gorged in that field until they were too heavy to fly away again. So they had to stay the night on the ground, sleeping among the grain-straw and grass.

You'd think they would have learned their lesson, but in the morning, instead of flying away, they decided to eat a little more and rest in that field of grain for one more night.

Every morning they decided the same thing, to eat a little more and sleep another night, until they got to be so heavy that they couldn't fly anymore. They could only hop, and not quickly either.

Then the trees began to turn yellow and red again. Frost was on the ground and the winter winds came blowing. The toad burrowed in his mud. The bear returned to his den. The crows watched from the bare-limbed trees and laughed.

Because the Littles couldn't fly away. They couldn't fly at all. They were too fat.

The grain-straw was getting dry. The tall grass browned, grew thin, and died. After watching the mice and squirrels store away their own harvests, the Littles began to shake the grain from the blades of grass and gather it in heaps with their wings, storing it in hidey-holes and hollow logs. The downy feathers of their wings became all gluey, sticking to each other. Their wings took the shape of arms and hands and even if they could manage to lose weight, they were no longer able to fly at all now for they'd become people—tiny people, six inches tall.

That winter they had to dig holes in the sides of the mountains and along the shores of the rivers, making places to live.

And it's been like that ever since.

In the years to follow, they've come to live among us, sharing our bounty the way mice do, only they are so secret we never see them at all. And they still travel, from town to town, from borough to borough, from city block to the next one over, and then the next one over from that. That's why we call them the Travelling Littles.

But the Travelling Littles are still birds, even if their arms are no longer wings. They can never see a tall building or a mountain without wanting to get to the top. But they can't fly anymore. They have to walk up there, just like you or me.

Still the old folks say, those who know this story and told it to me, that one day the Travelling Littles will get their wings back. They will be birds again.

Only no one knows when.

"You want to know how to become a bird again," she said.

Jenky Wood nodded. "We thought you would know. Yula Gry came across a copy of your book in a child's library last year and told us about it at our year's end celebration. Palko John—"

"Who are these people?"

"Yula is the sister of my brother's cousin Sammy, and Palko John is our Big Man. He's the chief of our clan, but he's also the big chief of all the tribe. He decided that we should look for you. When we found out where you lived, I was sent to talk to you."

"Why were you chosen?"

He had the decency to blush.

"Because they all say I'm too good-natured to offend anyone, or take offense."

Sheri stifled a laugh. "Well," she said. "I'm usually much less cranky when I've been awake for a little longer and have had at least one cup of coffee. Speaking of which, I need one now. I also have to have a pee."

At that he went beet-red.

"What, you people don't? Never mind," she added. "That was just more crankiness. Can I pick you up?"

When he gave her a nervous nod, she lowered her hand so that he could step onto her palm, keeping her thumb upright so he'd have something to hang on to. She took him into the kitchen, deposited him on the table, plugged in the kettle, then went back down the hall to the washroom.

Ten minutes later she was sitting at the table with a coffee in front of her. Jenky sat on a paperback book, holding the thimbleful of coffee she'd given him. She broke off a little piece of a bran cookie and offered it to him before dipping the rest into her coffee.

"So why would you want to become birds again, anyway?" she asked.

"Look at the size of us. Can you imagine how hard it is for us to get around while still keeping our secret?"

"Point taken."

Neither spoke while they ate their cookies. Sheri sipped at her coffee.

"Did your grandfather really tell you our story?" Jenky asked after a moment.

Sheri nodded.

"Could you bring me to him?"

"He passed away a couple of years ago."

"I'm sorry."

Silence fell again between them.

"Look,"Sheri said after a moment. "I don't know any more than what you read in my book, but I could look into it for you."

"Really?"

"No, I'm actually way too busy. Joke," she added as his face fell. "It was a joke."

"Palko John said we could offer you a reward for your help."

"What sort of reward?"

"Anything you want."

"Like a magic wish?" Sheri asked, intrigued.

He nodded. "We only have the one left."

"Why don't you use it to make yourselves birds again?"

"They only work for other people."

"Figures. There's always a catch, isn't there? But I don't want your wish."

He went all glum again. "So you won't help us?"

"Didn't I already say I would? I just don't like the idea of magic wishes. There's something creepy about them. I think we should earn what we get, not have it handed to us on a little silver platter."

That earned her a warm smile.

"I think we definitely chose the right person to help us," he said.

"Well, don't start celebrating yet," Sheri told him. "It's not like I have any idea how to go about it. But like I said, I will look into it."

"I've decided to give up men," Sheri told Holly Rue later that day. She'd arrived early at Holly's store for the afternoon book club meeting that the used book shop hosted on the last Wednesday of every month. The book they'd be discussing today was Alice Hoffman's *The River King*, which Sheri had adored. Since she had to wait for the others to get here to discuss it, she kept herself busy talking with Holly and fussing with Snippet, Holly's Jack Russell terrier, much to the dog's delight.

"I thought you'd already done that," Holly said.

"I did. But this time I really mean it."

"Have a bad date?"

"It's not so much having a bad date as, A, not wanting to see him again after said date, but he does and keeps calling; or B, wanting to see him again because it seemed we were getting along so well, but he doesn't call. I'm worn out from it all."

"You could call him," Holly said.

"I could. Would you?"

Holly sighed. "Not to ask him out."

"I thought women's lib was supposed to have sorted all of this out by now."

"I think it's not only society that's supposed to change, but us, too. *We* have to think differently."

"So why don't we?"

Holly shook her head. "Same reason they don't call, I guess. Give me a hob over a man any day."

Sheri cocked her head and studied Holly for a long moment.

"What?" Holly said. "Did I grow an extra nose?"

"No, I'm just thinking about hobs. I wanted to talk to you about them."

Holly's gaze went to an empty chair near the beginning of the store's farthest aisle, then came back to Sheri.

"What about them?" she asked.

There was now something guarded in the book-seller's features, but Sheri plunged on anyway.

"Were you serious about having one living in your store?" she asked.

"Um … serious as in, is it true?"

A few months ago they'd been out celebrating the nomination of one of Sheri's books for a local writing award—she hadn't won. That was when Holly had mentioned this hob, laughed it off when Sheri had asked for more details, and then changed the subject.

"Because the thing is," Sheri said. "I could use some advice about little people right about now."

"You've got a hob living in your apartment?"

"No, I've got a Little—though he's only visiting."

"But Littles aren't—"

"Real," Sheri finished for her. "Any more than hobs. We both know that. Yet there he is, waiting for me in my apartment all the same. I've set him up on a bookshelf with a ladder so that he can get up and down, and got some of my old Barbie furniture out of my storage space in the basement."

"You kept your Barbie stuff?"

"And it's a good thing I did, seeing how useful it's proven to be today. Jenky—that's his name; Jenky Wood—likes the size, though he's not particularly enamoured with the colors."

"You're serious?"

"So it seems," Sheri told her. "Apparently he thinks I can find out how they can all become birds again."

"Like in your story."

Sheri nodded. "Although I haven't got the first clue."

"Well, I—"

But just then the front door opened and Kathryn Whelan, one of the other members of their book club, came in.

"I think I know someone who can help you," Holly said, before turning to smile at the new arrival.

Snippet lifted her head from Sheri's lap with interest—hoping for another biscuit like the one Sheri had given her earlier, no doubt.

"Someone tall, dark, and handsome—not to mention single?" Sheri asked after they'd exchanged hellos with Kathryn.

"Not exactly."

"Who's tall, dark, and handsome?" Kathryn asked.

"The man of my dreams," Sheri told her.

Kathryn smiled. "Aren't they all?"

Sheri was helping Jenky rearrange the Barbie furniture on the bookshelf she'd cleared for his use when the doorbell rang.

"That'll be her," she said, suddenly nervous.

"Should I hide?" Jenky asked.

"Well, that would kind of defeat the whole purpose of this, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose. It's just that letting myself be seen goes so against everything I've ever been told. My whole life has been a constant concentration of secrets and staying hidden."

"Buck up," Sheri told him. "If all goes well, you might be a bird again and it won't matter who sees you."

"I'd rather be both," he said as she went to get the door.

She paused, hand on the knob. "Really?"

"Given a choice, wouldn't you want to be able to go back and forth between bird and Little?"

She gave a slow nod. "I suppose I would."

She turned back to open the door and everything just kind of melted away in her head. Jenky's problem, the conversation they'd just had, the day of the week.

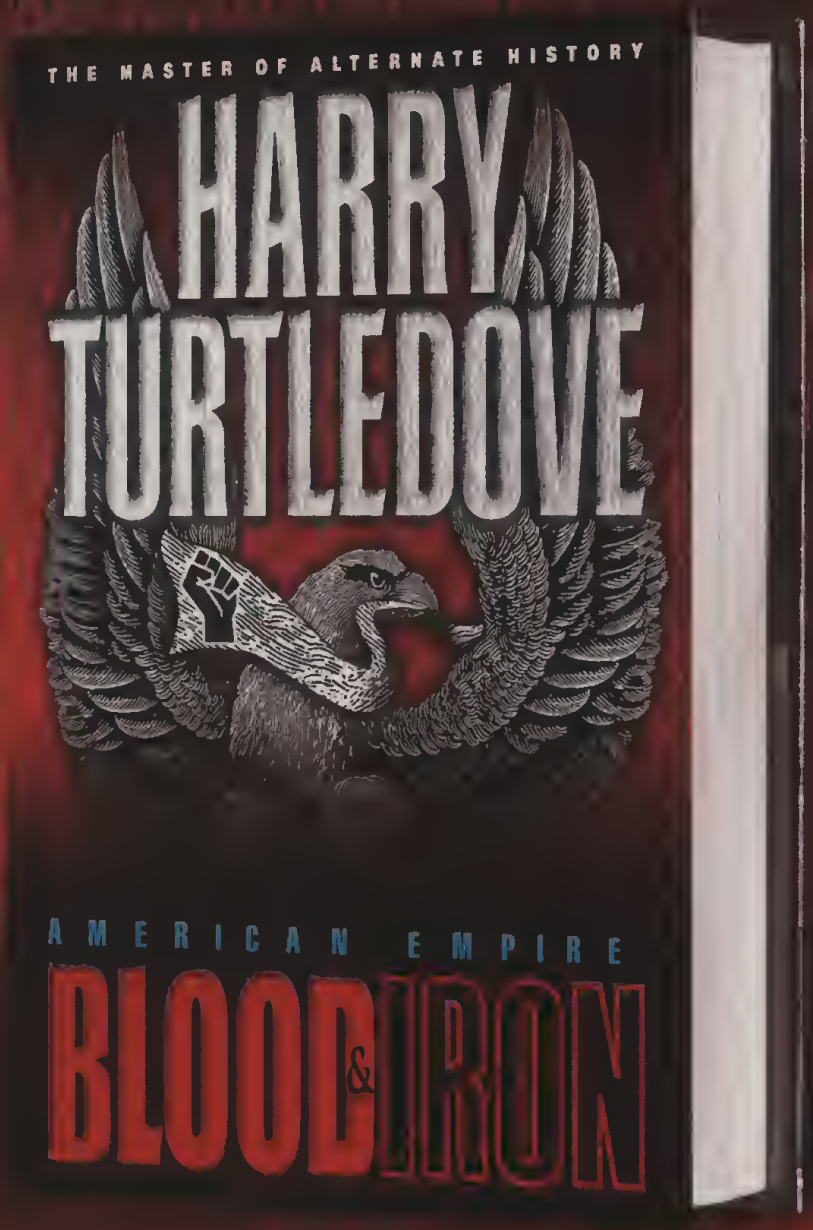
"Oh my," Sheri said.

The words came out unbidden, for standing there in the hallway was the idealization of a character she'd been struggling with for weeks. The new picture book hadn't exactly stalled, but she kept having to write around this one character because she couldn't quite get her clear in her head. She'd filled pages in her sketchbook with drawings, particularly frustrated because while she knew what the character was supposed to look like, she was unable to get just the right image of her down on paper. Or perhaps a better way to put it was that she didn't so much know what the woman should look like; she just knew when it was wrong.

But now here the perfect subject was, standing in the hallway.

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Where were her watercolors and some paper? Or just a pencil and the back of an envelope. Hell, she'd settle for a camera.

Although really, none of that would be necessary. Now that she'd seen her, it would be impossible for Sheri to forget her.

It wasn't that the woman was particularly exotic, though there were those striking green streaks that ran through her nut-brown hair. She wasn't dressed regally either, though her simple white blouse and long flower-print skirt nevertheless left an impression of royal vestments. It wasn't even that she was so beautiful—there were any number of beautiful women in the world.

No, there was an air about her, a quality both mysterious and simple that had been escaping Sheri for weeks when she was doing her character sketches. But she had it now. She'd begin with a light golden wash, creating a nimbus of light behind the figure's head, and then—

"I hope that's a pleased 'Oh my,'" the woman said.

Her voice brought Sheri back into the present moment.

"What? Oh, yes. It was. I mean I was just …"

The woman offered her hand. "My name's Meran Kelledy. Holly did tell you I was coming by, didn't she?"

Her voice was soft and melodic with an underlying touch of gentle humor.

"I'm sorry," Sheri said as she shook Meran's hand. "I can't believe I've left you standing out there in the hall." She stood aside. "Please come in. It's just that you just caught me by surprise. See, you look exactly like the forest queen I need for this book I'm working on at the moment and …" She laughed. "I'm babbling, aren't I?"

"What sort of forest is she the queen of?"

"An oak forest."

Meran smiled. "Well, that's all right, then."

With that enigmatic comment, she came into the apartment. Sheri watched her for one drawn-out moment longer, then shut the door to join Meran and Jenky in the living room.

"I should also tell you that there's a wish up for grabs," Sheri said after she and Jenky had taken turns telling their story. The two women were sitting at the kitchen table, Jenky on the table in a pink plastic chair. They all had tea—Jenky in his thimble since he didn't like the plastic Barbie dishware, the women in regular porcelain mugs.

"For the one who helps the Littles with this, I mean," Sheri added.

Meran shook her head. "I have no need for wishes."

Of course she wouldn't.

Meran was probably the calmest woman that Sheri had ever met. Neither meeting the Little nor the story the two of them had told seemed to surprise her. She'd simply given Jenky a polite hello, then sat and nodded while they talked, occasionally asking a question to clarify one point or another.

What world does she live in? Sheri had found herself thinking.

A magical one, no doubt. Like the forest in Sheri's latest picture book.

"You can have it," Meran said.

But Sheri shook her head right back. "I don't believe in something for nothing."

"Good for you."

What an odd response. But Sheri didn't take the time to dwell on it.

"So can you help us turn them back into birds again?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, no. Odd as it came to be, the Littles have evolved into what they now are and that kind of thing can't be turned back. It's like making the first fish that came onto land return to the sea. Or forcing the monkeys to go back up into the trees once more instead of becoming men and women. Evolution doesn't work that way. It moves forward, not back."

"But magic. …"

"Operates from what appears to be a different law of physics, I'll admit, but that's only because it's misunderstood. If you have the right vocabulary, it can make perfect sense."

Sheri sighed. "So we're back where we started."

"No, because the clock doesn't turn backward."

"I don't understand."

Sheri might have felt dumb, but Jenky looked as confused as she was feeling and he was a piece of magic himself, so she decided not to worry about it.

"What's to stop the Littles from continuing to evolve?" Meran asked. "Into, say, beings that can change from bird to Little at will the way Jenky here has said he'd like to."

"Well, for one thing, we don't know how."

"Now there I can help you. Or at least I can set the scene so that you can help him."

"I'm still not following you."

"There's an old tribe of words," Meran explained. "Not the kind we use today, but the ones that go back to the before, when a word spoken created a moment in which anything can happen."

"The before?" Sheri asked.

"It's just another way to say the first days of the world," Jenky told her. "Our storytellers still tell the stories of those days, of Raven and Cody and the crow girls and all."

"It was a time of Story," Meran said. "Although, of course, every age has its stories, just as every person does. But these were the stories that shaped the world, and part of that shaping had to do with this old tribe of words."

"A tribe of words," Sheri repeated, feeling way out of her depth here.

Meran nodded. "I can wake one of those words for you," she said. "Not for a long time, but for long enough."

"So you'll just say one of these words and everything'll be the way we want it to be?"

"Hardly," Meran said with a smile. "I can only wake one of that old tribe. You will need to say the words. It's a form of communal magic, which is mostly the kind I know. One person wakes it, another gives it focus."

"But I wouldn't know what to say. Maybe Jenky should do it."

"No, this works better when a human speaks the words."

That gave Sheri pause, the way Meran said the word "human." It was the way humans spoke of other species. She wanted to ask Meran what she was, but she supposed now wasn't the time. And it would probably be impolite.

"So what words do I say?" she asked instead.

"You'll know when the time is right."

"But. …"

Meran gave her another of her smiles. "Don't worry so much."

"OK."

Sheri looked from the magical woman sitting across the table from her to the even more magical little man sitting on a Barbie kitchen chair between them. Jenky watched her expectantly. Meran said nothing, did nothing. There was an odd, unfocused look to her gaze, but otherwise she seemed to merely be waiting, managing to do so without conveying the vaguest sense of pressure.

But there was pressure all the same—self-imposed on Sheri's part, but no less urgent for that.

What if she didn't say the right thing? How much was she supposed to say? How was she supposed to know when the time was right?

It was all so nebulous.

"So when do we start?" Sheri asked.

Meran's gaze came into focus and found Sheri's.

"Breathe," she said. "Slowly. Try to still the conversations that rise up in your head and don't concentrate on anything until you feel a change. You'll know it when you feel it."

Then she slowly closed her eyes. Sheri copied her, closing her own eyes. Breathing deeply and slowly, she tried to feel this change. Something, anything. Maybe a difference in the air. Some sense that they were sideways from the world as she knew it, inhabiting a pocket of the world where magic could happen.

If magic *was* real, that was.

If it ...

She wasn't sure where it originated, the sudden impression of assurance that came whispering through her, calm and sure and secret. She felt like she was at the center of some enormous wheel and that all the possibilities of what might be were radiating out from her like a hundred thousand filigreed spokes. It was like floating, like coming apart and reconnecting with everything. But it was also like being utterly focused as well. She could look at all those threads arcing away from her and easily find and hold the one that was needed in her mind.

"Hope," she said.

"Is that word for them or for you?"

As soon as Meran asked the question, Sheri saw how it could go. She realized that under the connection she felt to this wheel of possibilities, she'd continued to harbor her own need, continued to reach for that elusive partner every single person looked for, whether they admit it or not. He could be called to her with Meran's old tribal word. The right partner, the perfect partner. All she had to do was say, "For me."

Because magic was real, she knew that now. At least this magic was real. It could bring him to her.

But then she opened her eyes. Her gaze went to Jenky, watching her with expectant eyes and held breath.

Promises made. Promises broken.

What good were promises if you didn't keep them? How could you respect yourself, never mind expect anyone else to respect you, if you could break them so easily? What would the perfect man think of her when he learned how she'd brought him to her?

Not to mention what she'd said barely 10 minutes ago, how it wasn't right to have something for nothing.

But that was before she'd realized it could really be made to happen.

That was before all the lonely nights were washed away with the promise of just the right man coming into her life.

"No," she said. "I meant faith. Belief. That bird and Little can be one again, the shape they wear being their own choice."

Meran smiled.

"Done," she said.

Sheri felt a rumbling underfoot, like a subway car running just under the basement of her apartment building. But there was no subway within blocks of her place. The tea mugs rattled on the table and Jenky gripped the seat of his chair. Something swelled inside her, deep and old, too big for her to hold inside.

And then it was gone.

Sheri blinked and looked at Meran.

Was that it? she wanted to ask. What happened? Did it work?

But before she could speak, there was a blur of motion in the middle of the kitchen table. Jenky leapt up, knocking his little chair down. He lifted his arms and they seemed to shrink back into his body at the same time as his fingers grew long, long, longer. Feathers burst from them in a sudden cloud. His birdish features became a bird's head in truth, and then the whole of the little man was gone and a gray and brown bird rose up from the tabletop, flapping its wings. It circled once, twice, three times around the room, then landed on the table again, the transformation reversing itself until Jenky was standing there.

He looked up at her, grinning from ear to ear.

Sheri smiled back at him.

"I guess it worked," she said.

A couple of days later, Sheri looked up from her drawing table, distracted by the tap-tap-tapping on her windowpane. A little brown and gray bird looked in at her, its head cocked to one side.

"Jenky?" she said.

The bird tapped at the glass again so she stepped around her table and opened the window. The bird immediately flew in and landed on the top of her drawing table where it became a little raggedy man. Sheri wasn't even startled anymore.

"Hello, hello!" Jenky cried.

"Hello, yourself. You're looking awfully pleased with yourself."

"Everyone's so happy. They all wanted to come by and say thank you and hello, but Palko John said that would be indecorous so it's just me."

"Well, I'm glad to see you, too."

Jenky looked like he wanted to dance around where he was standing, but he made himself stand straight and tall.

"I'm supposed to ask you if you've decided on your wish," he said.

"I already told you—I don't want a wish."

"But you helped us, and that was our promise to you."

Sheri shook her head. "I still don't want it. You should keep it for yourselves."

"And I already told you. We can't use it for ourselves."

Sheri shrugged. "Then find someone who really needs it. A person whose only home is an alleyway. A child fending off unwelcome attention. Someone who's dying, or hurt, or lonely, or sad. You Littles must go all over the city. Surely you can find someone who

"MY WHOLE LIFE HAS BEEN A CONSTANT CONCENTRATION OF SECRETS AND STAYING HIDDEN."

needs a wish."

"That's your true and final answer?"

"Now you sound like a game show host," she told him.

He wagged a finger at her. "It's too late in the day to be cranky. Even you have to have been up for hours now."

"You still don't get my jokes, do you?"

"No," he said. "But I'll learn."

"Anyway, that's my true and final answer."

"Then I'll find such a person and give them your wish."

With that he became a bird once more. He did a quick circle around her head, followed by a whole series of complicated loops and swirls that took him from one end of the room to the other, showing off.

"Come back and visit!" Sheri called as he headed for the window.

The bird twittered, then it darted out the window and was gone.

"So what's the deal with Meran?" Sheri asked Holly the next time she came by the book store. "Where do you know her from?"

"I had a ... pixie incident that she helped me out with last year."

"A pixie incident."

Holly nodded. "The store was overrun with them. They came off the Internet like a virus and were causing havoc up and down the street until she helped us get them back into the Net."

"Us being you and your hob?"

Just as she had the last time the subject of the hob came up, Holly's gaze went to an empty chair near the beginning of the store's farthest aisle, only this time there was a little man sitting there, brown-faced and curly-haired. He gave Sheri a shy smile and lifted a hand in greeting.

"Oh-kay," Sheri said.

She could have sworn there was no one sitting there a moment ago and his sudden appearance made the whole world feel a little off-kilter. She'd only *just* gotten used to little men who could turn into birds.

"Sheri, this is Dick Bobbins," Holly said. "Dick, this is Sheri Piper."

"I like your books," the hob said.

His compliment gave Sheri perhaps the oddest feeling that she'd had so far in all of this affair, that a fairy tale being should like *her* fairy tale books.

"Um, thank you," she managed.

"He didn't appear out of nowhere," Holly assured her, undoubtedly in response to the look on Sheri's face. "Hobs have this ability to be so still that we don't notice them unless they want us to."

"I knew that."

Holly grinned. "Sure you did."

"OK, I didn't. But it makes sense in a magical nothing-really-makes-sense sort of a way. Kind of like birds turning into Littles, and vice versa."

"So was Meran able to help you?"

The hob leaned forward in his chair, obviously as interested as Holly was.

Sheri nodded and told them about how it had gone.

"I understand why you didn't let Meran's magic bring you the right guy," Holly said when she was done. "I mean, after all. You *were* calling it up for the Littles. What I don't understand is, why didn't you use the wish they offered you?"

"Because it's something for nothing. It's like putting a love spell on someone. Isn't it better to get to know someone at a natural pace, work out the pushes and pulls of the relationship to make it stronger, instead of having it all handed to you on a platter?"

"I suppose. But what if you never meet the right guy?"

"That's the risk I have to take."

IT WAS LIKE FLOATING, LIKE COMING APART AND RECONNECTING WITH EVERYTHING.

So here I am, still waiting like an idiot on the man of my dreams.

I don't know which bugs me more: that he hasn't shown up yet, or that I'm still waiting.

But I got to do a good turn and my picture book is done. Meran loved the paintings I did of her as the forest queen. Her husband even bought one of the originals once I'd gotten the color transparencies made.

What else? I've got a new friend who's a hob, and at least once a week Jenky Wood flies up to my windowsill in the shape of a bird, tapping on my windowpane until I let him in. I've got my Barbie furniture permanently set up for him on a shelf in my studio, though I have repainted it in more subdued colors.

So what am I saying?

I don't know. That we all have ups and downs, I guess, whether we bring them on ourselves or they come courtesy of the Fates. The trick seems to be to roll with them. Learn something from the hard times, appreciate the good.

I didn't really need fairy encounters to teach me that, but I wouldn't trade the experience of them for anything. Not even for that elusive, perfect man.❧

Author's Note: Sheri's story of the Travelling Littles is adapted from an Appalachian story detailing the origin of gypsies; I found my version in *Virginia Folk Legends*, edited by Thomas E. Barden. Thanks to Charles Vess for introducing me to this delightful book.

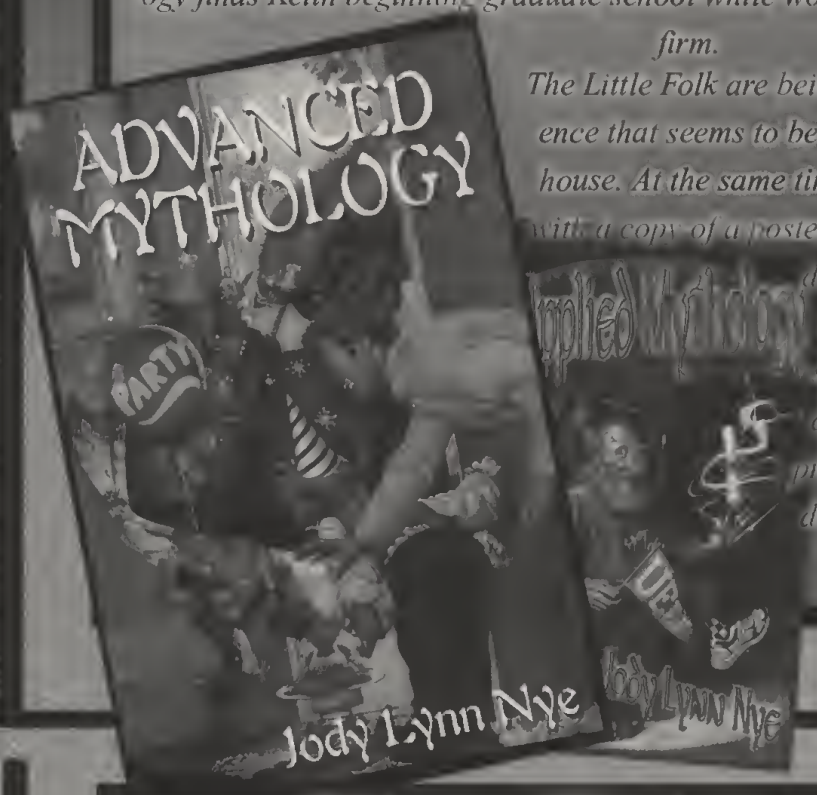
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Limnery

in Cursive



Summer lay heavy on the crown city of Ollo-rawn when the scribe came to Luriel's home. He had negotiated the narrow, fetid streets of the poorest quarters. His silk tunic was stained, his hair plastered to his brow. But he gave polite greeting and bowed with genuine respect to the ragged woman—Luriel's aunt, Ashara—who warily opened the door at his soft knock. No spiked boots to kick it in, no razored gauntlets slicing the thick air to motion them out to their deaths. He addressed them formally, granting the deference due their scholarship. It had been three generations since anyone had treated their kind honorably. Luriel could see that her family was perplexed. What possessed this man, with his good teeth and strong bones and clear skin, his tailored clothes and fine leather satchel, to risk life and limb to see them?

As Ashara admitted him and shut the door with a quick glance down the stairwell, his gaze came to rest on Luriel, and he nodded once, his gold-flecked hazel eyes sliding closed, briefly quenching the fever-bright desire that burned there.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. A lot of knowledge is a lot more dangerous—to those who have it.

Having seen those eyes, Aunt Ashara said, "If it's a love potion you're after, or a healing for some relative, you've come a long way for naught. Our trade is banned—or hadn't you heard?" She turned her head, as if to check the stewpot bubbling on the fire, but really to emphasize her marked cheek.

"No, madam," he said. "I know the sentence wizardry carries. I am no spy come to entrap you into casting." He gave a tight, nervous smile. "And I know you don't traffic in potions."

"Why, then?" Corlin, Luriel's uncle, demanded, coming down the ladder from the loft, where he had been all afternoon. Both his cheeks bore the symbols left by the king's branding irons. He was one of the few who had transgressed twice and lived—a testament to the love the king's son bore him when he fostered at the castle. The magelight blazed in him, and he had found his way back to his own people, and used his royal cachet as long as he could. Now even the prince could not save him, if he was caught a third time.

"Why?" the court scribe echoed. His burning gaze fell again on Luriel.

"I invited him," Luriel said.

Corlin and Ashara turned and openly stared. Luriel had not spoken aloud in two years.

"I've been teaching him to write verse in the old styles," she said, words coming now in a joyous flood. "He's a very good pupil. In return, he's provided parchment and ink, brushes and pigment, even gold leaf. He bound this for me, in the castle bindery." She drew a small velvet codex from a deep pocket of her kirtle. "It was blank when he gave it to me. I've filled it, Seblik."

"As you were meant to."

"Is it her hand you want, then?" Ashara said, gauging him in a new way. "She's too young for you."

He failed to suppress a wince. Luriel felt sorry for him. She had been branded two years ago, at 10. She could not pass the castle gates, much less wed one of its scribes.

"No," he said, "and I do not deserve her in any event. They dress me well and feed me well, but I am in essence a slave. My eyes and hands were sold to the king when I was a child, and any children I sire belong to him. When my sight fails and my hands cramp with age, they will put me out to beg for alms. Any woman I took to wife would be herself a slave. Your life is hard here. But it belongs to you."

Then run away, Luriel had said to him, so many times. *Come live with us. We'll hide you.*

He had smiled in his sad way, and said, *Sweet Luriel. They would find me and kill me. I am a weak, frightened man approaching middle age. Escape demands a bravery I know better than to expect of myself.*

It's not brave to run away, she had said.

No. But it takes courage and strength of heart to build a new life for yourself. Besides, if I escaped, who would steal your materials for you?

But he *was* brave. He was so much braver than he knew.

"He's come here for knowledge," Luriel said, caressing the soft cover of her codex. "He wants to read our volumes of lore, study the ancient languages. I've taught him all I can, but I'm still learning. He'd like to learn, too."

Corlin rose from his seat, face darkening. Ashara took his arm, though there was no telling if he meant to throw the scribe out or strike Luriel for divulging their secret to a stranger. He was not young, but Corlin was a big man still roped in muscle from his dockman's trade. Seblik blanched, but held his ground.

"I know about your codices," he said. "I've known for some time that … mages were guarding the old lore." Luriel could tell that he was about to say "marked ones." She was glad he used their own term for themselves. "A small store of volumes in each house, safe in a tin behind the hearth or above the privy. A vast, precious library, cached in pieces throughout the squalid sectors of the city. I applaud you for saving what you have."

The only permissible writing in Ollorawn was treaties, contracts, bills of sale … the only permissible language in Ollorawn was modern Ghardic, its common tongue. Anything else might be wizardry, and thus all else was. Seblik na Lareon spent his days copying ledgers, notating transactions, drafting letters on behalf of royalty and merchants. An amanuensis, when he craved poetry, history. Luriel had given him what she could. But she owed him so much more. The only other thing she had to offer, besides her body, which was not yet ready, and her heart, which he already had, was their great secret.

Ashara looked at Luriel and said to Seblik, "You're the one, aren't you?"

He lowered his gaze, embarrassed, but nodded.

"Then you shall have whatever teaching you desire," Ashara said in a careful voice, moving to Luriel's side, stroking her hand once down the long fall of her hair. "You came here at great risk to yourself. You will have to come again. It cannot be taught in a day. But what you wish, you shall have."

Luriel beamed—but Seblik shook his head.

"That is not why I have come today. And you could not do it in any event."

A stillness came on the room. The fire crackled, pouring unwelcome heat into the humid space. The neglected pot boiled too high. Something in the loft toppled with a crash, and Ashara and Corlin exchanged an agonized look, and Luriel realized: They already knew. Whatever Seblik had come to tell them, it was related to something they had kept from her. What had Corlin been doing in the loft all those hours? He had not permitted her to help him. Ashara had busied her with makework, sorting her clothes into piles, what she wore often and what they could pass to the beggars, but she hadn't minded, because today Seblik might come, he'd said he might, she'd told him the way—

"The king knows," Seblik said. "I kept the log of his meeting with the informers. You concealed it well, for many days. But he has signed the decree to round you all up at dawn. Prince Erith is in shackles for his part in the deception. There is no helping you now."

"How did you get out of the castle?" Corlin asked. His voice was very flat.

Seblik glanced at Luriel, where she sat clutching the little book against her chest, desperately trying to make sense of what they were saying, trying to find a way for Seblik to stay and read with her and learn and practice the old tongues. They were to sit by the fire as the autumn winds came to scratch at the door. He was to see that a new life with them would not be such a hard thing to build. He was to wait until she grew up—

"Favors owed by a watchman," he said. "Favors that would cost him his manhood if they were known. He had no choice."

"And when you go back?" Corlin said.

Seblik's smile was thin. "It depends on who's on duty."

Ashara took her crocheted summer shawl from its peg behind the

It came back on her in and terror

door. Corlin was inking a quill, preparing to write a message on one of their precious supply of scrolls. "You have indeed dared much," he said. "And we have little time. Can you spare an hour to sup with us? Never go into exile on an empty stomach, I always say."

They laughed, adults sharing some brave joke in the face of dark times to come, and Luriel, forgotten, burst from her chair. "What?" she cried. "*What's happening?*"

Ashara reached for her. "Oh, my love …"

She eeled away from her aunt and threw herself into Seblik's arms. He held her tight, as he had held her so long ago. The familiar rosewater smell of him mixed with the familiar smells of home—lentil stew, limewashed vellum, linseed oil, acrid ink. He breathed her name. Then he took her shoulders in firm hands, pushed her back, turned her to face her uncle, who was all the father she had now, and gave her into his keeping.

"We are leaving the city," Corlin said quietly, looking her straight in the eyes. "We are leaving Ollorawn forever."

It came back on her in a rush, the night of lace and terror and burning.

The beginning was like any other. A duke and his scribe and two soldiers came to the door and demanded entrance. Mother, as always, made her hide under the table, this time behind the good lace draped for their solstice observance. In the wizards' quarter, folk lived in single rooms above shops that catered only to their own, and theirs had had no loft. Luriel had seen this before: the fine boots tramped in, the orders were given, the casting was done, the boots tramped out. Although magecraft was banned, still the rich and the royal came to be cured, healed, strengthened. They paid in silver, if they paid at all; Mother said they believed it was customary. They had many misconceptions about the craft, and there was no longer anything anyone could do to set them right. Some mages considered such a visit lucky—it meant that a man of power might turn a blind eye the next time a casting was discovered. Father called those mages fools, and said they'd hang as high as anyone. Father never tried to protect her from the truth.

puff, and the casting was complete. Luriel shivered. Even a casting as basic as this was a thing of awesome power. No wonder the king was afraid.

Someday, she had thought, *I'll find people who aren't afraid to fight and cast the king right out of Ollorawn, and all his nobles and all his rich men, and anyone else who says that magecraft is evil and then wastes a little calf's life on something herbs would cure.*

"Ahh," the duke sighed. "Much better, good wizards. Now let's find out what you're truly made of." Through the web of lace, Luriel saw his booted feet pivot; he must have gestured to one of his men. "Bring him in."

Hurled onto the floor in the middle of the casting circle was a youth, bound and gagged, in clothes finer than Luriel had seen anyone dare wear into this quarter.

"This young man has aided wizards," the duke said. "I can think of no better punishment for him than one meted out by wizards, can you?"

What he wanted them to do was unspeakable.

"We are only two," Mother said. "What you ask cannot be done."

Silence, another gesture she couldn't see, an oath from her father, and a razor-gauntleted arm reached suddenly into her hiding place and hauled her out into the light. Father lunged for her. A sword came up. The duke said, "Hold! Don't kill him. I want this boy's confession—a little sorcery of our own. And I want him to feel the sting of the abomination he tried to protect."

Luriel looked at their faces. The duke's was pinched and cruel, the soldiers' were scarred and craggy; the scribe's was handsome and impassive. He held a goatskin parchment not unlike one they might use for a casting, and an inkpot, and a quill—his tools were their tools. He was gripping them very hard, and standing very straight. His tense body said everything his face did not.

"Here's your third," the duke said.

"She shows no light," Father said. "Sometimes it skips a generation—"

"A lie."

"She's too young," Mother said. "She's not trained."

a rush, the night of lace and burning.

But something was wrong. The duke was laughing, demanding they scribe a curse for him to put under his wife's pillow. "That can't be done with magecraft," Mother said. "Cure these chilblains for me, then," he'd replied. "Surely your sorcery is capable of that?" His men snickered.

It was a waste of precious vellum. A calf had died to provide the skin they scribed on. But Mother and Father complied. With only two of them, it should be a weak casting. Effective castings required three. But Father had talent and a strong spirit, and Mother's magelight was the brightest anyone had ever seen.

They chalked a ritual circle on the floor, over the ghost of all the erased circles, and sat across from each other. Father inscribed the vellum with the ancient curative verses, the next thing that Luriel was supposed to learn. She wished she could see him write. She loved his flowing hand, the cursive style of old Celyrian, the most powerful language for healings. Then he handed the vellum leaf to Mother, who painted a viridian weave of vining trefoils around his words. In the codices hidden under the floorboards they sat on, the illuminations were elaborate, gilded, permanent—but powerless. At the end, as Mother sang the words that Father had inscribed, to bind their magelights into the work, the inscribed leaf dissipated in a frosty

"Let this be her training. Let her learn, now, the truth of your dark craft."

"We do not use our craft to cause pain."

"But you can."

"We will not."

Fraying rope could not be very difficult, Luriel thought, or melting swords; they did harder things when they knit broken bones and routed out disease. Couldn't her mother see the possibilities? They'd pretend to obey, but use the casting to free the youth and disarm the men, and he and her father could fight off the soldiers, and the duke would have to go away—

"You'll have to kill us," Mother said. "We will not harm this boy."

"I have other forms of incentive." The duke motioned to his soldiers. There were three—the two who'd come in first, and the one who'd guarded the youth. Now the heaviest one grabbed Luriel, and the tallest grabbed her father. The third strode to the fire, and with gloved hands unwrapped an iron he'd tucked in his scabbard belt. He plunged its wrought end into the embers. The heavy one dragged her to the hearth. The embers hissed.

"She'll be marked anyway, when she's older," her mother said. Luriel had never seen an expression so flat. The mark on her mother's

"She taught me that there are know. She writes in languages

cheek seemed to burn: three curved arms radiating from a central point into a joined periphery. It represented a casting circle and three mages. Mother said they should wear it with pride.

As the hot iron was brought to Luriel's cheek, the duke said, "Let this serve as an indication of what else I will do to her if you refuse."

Father roared and drove his skull into the face of the soldier behind him.

It all ran together: the agony, her scream, the smell of burning flesh, another scream, the scribe easing the duke's blood-soaked body to the floor, the penknife in his hand, the shock on his face, the blood pumping from the duke's neck and pouring from the soldier's nose, the soldier's sword in Father's grip as he launched himself, too late, to save her. The heavy soldier released her and drew his sword. The other dropped the hot iron and drew his own. She picked up the iron. The heavy one shifted to run her father through. She drove her arm up straight and caught him in the throat. He crumpled, gasping, clutching at his neck. He didn't seem to be able to breathe. The bones in her arm were jammed together; her hand was burned. She turned around as her father's sword clanged on the sword of the soldier who'd branded her. The two blades formed a bright X in the fire's glow. Her father's blade twisted and brought the soldier's down. Father glanced at her. The soldier's left hand was at his belt. Her mother shouted as the knife came out. Father looked back, but not in time; he froze, impaled on the blade, then spat into the soldier's face. The soldier flinched. He did not see Father hefting the sword in a last, monumental effort. Its arc took it through the soldier's neck.

"Galandra," her father said as he fell, and died. Her mother's name.

Her own name registered on her awareness and turned her head. Everything was happening through a white screen. The scribe was kneeling by the duke's body, wrestling with something. The third guard was disarmed, with a broken nose. But he, too, had a knife, a wicked curved blade. He held it underhand. Father said you should never hold a knife overhand, because the arc would bring it down into your own body as likely as anywhere else. Father had known about knives, and swords. Mother had not approved. Now Father lay dead, and Mother, who'd spoken peace and kindness all her life, stood and waited to be killed. Belatedly, her last words came through: "Run, Luriel. *Run.*"

But it was not brave to run away. The pain of her seared cheek was maddening. Her father lay in a pool of blood. There was blood everywhere. This was her *home.* It had all happened in an instant, one endless, impossible instant. The world could change that quickly. In an eyeblink.

She ran, blindly, screaming, at the armored man who was going to kill her mother.

She tripped over the bound man in the casting circle and sprawled under the guard's blade, into his knees.

The guard staggered and fell next to his duke, where the scribe still knelt. Luriel looked up into the scribe's beautiful face. It twisted into an expression of anguish as he wrenched the duke's knife free and, with a sob, brought it down, overhand, into the back of the guard's neck.

Now there would be no soldiers to tell what had happened here. Luriel knew that was important. She would never, ever tell what had happened here. She could not speak anyway for the agony in her face, but she would *not* speak—not until the world was whole again, no matter how long that might be.

Her mother had taken her, and their store of codices, to her sister's house. They'd released the youth; he'd aided mages before, and a mage had given his life in defense of him. And though they did not trust him they let him go, because Mother decided it. What they did with her father, or the dead duke and his soldiers, they never told her. The scribe had stood by her mother as long as he could, then gone off to summon the city watch and give them some agreed-upon story.

Then her mother had left. To keep Luriel safe, she said. Because there was work to do.

Someday, she'd thought, *I'll find people who aren't afraid to fight, and we'll kill the king, and all his dukes and all his soldiers.* The scribe had been afraid, but he had fought. She spent weeks trying to find him, haunting the merchant quarter, turning a fair cheek to anyone who saw her, going back after they saw the mark anyway and shooed her off or tried to wheedle secrets from her. She said nothing to any of them. When she spotted him at last, striding out of the quarter toward the Kingsroad, she ran after him and tugged on his coat. He hissed when he recognized her and hustled her into a shadowed alley.

"You mustn't be seen with me, ever," he said. "Don't look for me again. There's still suspicion; I don't know how long it will take to fade. Years." Then he'd really looked at her, checked to see how her cheek was healing, and pulled her roughly into his arms. "Thank the good spirits you're safe and well."

She'd carried ink and quill and scroll in a little pouch all those weeks. She drew them out now, and wrote, *What is your name?*

He'd tilted his head at her scribing. "I can't make it out."

But he was a scribe. He knew how to write. It wasn't that dark in the alley. She wrote the words again, taking pains to be clear. Still his eyes showed no comprehension. Puzzled, she tried the blocky glyphs of modern Ghardic. His eyes seemed to focus. "Ah!" he said. "But what in the world was *that*?"

Realization began to dawn.

Old Celyrian, she wrote, sounding the name out in Ghardic. *Can you not read that?*

He shook his head. "They don't teach that anymore. I've never even heard of it, and I can write in eight different languages. It's very beautiful."

Impatient, she stamped her foot and huffed: He had not answered her question. He smiled, and took her quill. *Seblik na Lareon,* he wrote, then tapped the page with equal, but feigned, impatience.

Luriel na Galandra, she wrote in return. *Will you meet me again?*

Of course I said yes, if we were very cautious about it," he told Corlin as they spooned up vegetable stew, while Ashara was on the roof sending his message by pigeon to mages on the other side of the city. Afterward, Corlin would go from door to door, while Ashara and Luriel finished packing. They would be ready by midnight. "I didn't know where she lived, and she was too canny to let me follow her. She fixed on me as some sort of defender, yet it took two years for her to trust me. She did not give up your secrets lightly. But she taught me that there are worlds beyond the world I know. She writes and thinks in languages I believed were dead or never knew existed. She knows, by heart, epics and lyrics in complex verse forms, while our children are punished for singing simple rhymes in the street. She takes for

worlds beyond the world I I believed were dead."

granted history that has been forbidden to us so long no one even misses it. She doesn't even consider it remarkable. I fell in love with her scribing, with her teaching. At first we communicated only with parchment and quill, that night had wounded her spirit so badly. After a year she started talking. I hope she'll start again."

He addressed that last to Luriel, where she sat on the hearthstones, arms crossed stubbornly across her chest. She remembered the day she first spoke again. It was the day she realized she loved him, and that with him by her side, she and her mother would be three again. Now Mother could come back.

Corlin came to sit next to her, his aging knees folding with an audible pop. "I'm sorry, love," he said. "We should have told you, but we didn't want to frighten you before it was time. Your mother never explained exactly what happened. Now that I've heard the story, I know you've faced far worse. So now I can tell you: Your mother has been working for two years to rally our kind. No, not to fight—don't look so fierce and satisfied. That was never her way, you know that. It was what your father, who was a soldier until they marked him, loved about her—that she could be so strong without ever doing harm. She's found a place for us to go—just mages, just folk who show a light, marked or not. She's been spreading the word, organizing. Mages sailed in ships from far ports, with supplies and livestock and everything we'll need, besides our craft, to make a new home. We were only waiting until the supply ships were there, so that our leaving wouldn't alert the king to send his warships to sink them. Now we can't afford to wait for word. We must go tonight. If wind and spirits were with them, they'll be waiting for us. We'll be happy there, Luriel. And it will be only us."

"No kings, or nobles, or soldiers?"

Corlin brushed the hair off her face, gently thumbed the dimpled mark on her cheek. "We're all veterans of a war. We'll all be kings, because we all have this symbol burned on our hearts."

"What did it mean, in ancient times?" Sehlik asked.

Corlin's hand dropped away. "It isn't ancient. Some henchman of some king thought it up, a symhol of terror and loathing. But it will be ancient someday. Where we're going, we'll redeem it."

"Come with us," Luriel blurted, and ran to the table to clutch Seblik's hand. "Oh, come with us, *please*."

He squeezed her hand as if he would never let go, but he said, "I'm not one of you, Luriel."

"You might as well he! You know everything!" Reflexively, she swallowed her next words, and then said them anyway, because truth was important now: "You killed for us."

He went pale but did not release her hand. It was the hand the hot iron had hurned when she picked it up and crushed the soldier's windpipe. She had killed, too. "I've done a lot of things, sweet Luriel. But never something as brave as what you're about to. What did I tell you about building a new home? You're all very strong, to do that. I take risks when I have to. But I'm not that strong. You are. Go create the most beautiful land the world has ever known. I will never forget you."

She could do a casting for courage. She could do it by herself, if she had to. They said you couldn't alter someone's mind or heart, hut castings could do anything if your magelight was bright enough, and hers was—she had her mother's light. Castings could kill, if you wanted them to. That's why magecraft was so strict, because they didn't want you to hurt or kill. But Father had known how to fight. In the last moment, he had looked to see if she was safe and didn't see the knife. You had to be more careful than that. If she was very careful, now, and slipped out onto the stairs while Ashara was packing … there was vellum in the box, there was ink mixed in the pot …

Ashara burst through the door just as Corlin frowned at the fire and asked if they smelled some foul thing burning. "It's begun," she said.

Luriel went to the window as Corlin swore and Seblik cursed himself for a fool. They were at the top of their building, four stories up, where it leaned out and nearly touched the building across from it, but the side window had a good view down the street. Toward the far end of the wizards' quarter, the sky glowed, like a sunset in the middle of the night.

"They've started at the castle end," Corlin said, wrapping food in waxed linen and shoving it into a woollen sack. "We're lucky." Luriel's clothes were folded and ready, and it took only moments to add them to the canvas duffel with the others. Ashara was climbing into the loft, where they'd brought the codices from all their hideyholes. "We can't take them all!" she said, looking at the battered leather satchel that was the sturdiest carryall they owned.

Luriel followed Seblik up the ladder. He was holding his own satchel, rugged cowhide stitched by the king's leathersmiths. "Take mine," he said, "it will carry more and more securely. I'll take the rest and try to hide them."

"Hide them here, stay here!" Luriel cried, past all reason.

"I'm afraid they're going to burn every building in this quarter," Seblik said gently. "They'll want all of you in the open so they can catch you. But you'll be gone."

"I can't choose, I don't know which ones we'll need," Ashara moaned. Corlin had tried all afternoon to sort them, and failed. All were precious.

"Just take what you can and trust the rest to me," Seblik said. "I'll see them safe. I promise you."

It was done before Luriel could get her breath. They were standing on the wrong side of the door, and Seblik was inside. "I'll pack the rest of the codices," he said, motioning for them to go. "Spirits speed you on your journey, good mages. I wish things had been different."

"Wait!" Luriel cried. She ducked under his embrace and back inside.

"Luriel, we haven't *time*," Ashara snapped. They could hear the cries now, the smashing doors, the dull clank of metal.

Luriel snatched up the velvet-bound codex that Seblik had given her to write dreams and wishes in. She pressed it into his hands.

"But this was a gift, it was for you …" he said helplessly.

"Now it's full, and now it's for you," she said. Then they were gone, out into the smoky night, rushing down the street, away from the clamor of riot, the roar of conflagration. Bound for exile in a land that no one had even named. She would see her mother again … but they would be only two, now.

They walked long into the night, past the city gates, past the silent fields, into a rocky place she had never been. Ahead of her lay only places she had never been. Other refugees joined them. Most were marked. All burned with magelight. Some spoke quietly as they walked, but Luriel just walked. She thought of the verses she had scribed for Seblik, lines of admiration and regret, illuminated with gratitude and hope. She envisioned him reading them—reading the old Celyrian she had taught him, teaching others how to read it.

He's braver than he thinks he is, she told herself.

She did not look back. She would see him again.

Celyrian was the language of healing. ❧

The Sea of Time and Space

True sacrifice requires true vision, but how can a visionary know what's true?

I have seen stars that have the redness of an eye, formed from the great and glittering dark. I have seen the suns that shine at midnight, and the hand of God reach down to touch the hand of man. I have seen a great many things in the sea of time and space, but I have seen nothing like the visitor who came to me one winter day. On several occasions I have had to account for the painting that illustrates that visitor, yet this is the first time that I have brought myself to tell the true story.

I had gone to see a customer that afternoon, to fetch a manuscript to proofread. I hoped to begin setting it in my little print shop on the following morning, and I was glad to be coming home. I intended that evening to work on certain pictures, granted to me through my visions, and I was anxious to continue this work, for to me, this was the reason and purpose of my life and not the mundane print tasks that I was compelled to undertake in order to support my own needs and those of my wife. Although the thought of the work was warming, I shivered as I crossed the river.

It was a cold evening, with frost ringing hard beneath the horses' hoofs on the earth of the London streets. My breath streamed white in the air, and as I entered the house, I heard the bells of St. Luke's ring out the hour and realized that I was late for supper. I could hear my wife's irritated footsteps clattering to and fro across the wooden kitchen floor as I hastened up the stairs to change my outdoor coat.

Just before the landing, however, I chanced to glance down and saw that an eye was watching me through a crack in the skirting. The eye was the size of a small apple; a dark, burnished crimson like a coal in the ashes. It looked like the eye of the Devil himself. Stepping hastily back, I tripped on the stair and dropped the manuscript. The eye winked, once, and retreated into the blackness beyond the wall.

"William!" called my wife's voice from the bottom of the stairs. "Whatever are you doing?"

I looked back toward the crack. There was nothing there. I said, "Catherine? I think there is something in the wall."

She snorted. "Of course there is. Rats, Mr. Blake." My wife only called me that if truly annoyed, which was rare. She went on, "The house is alive with them, as anyone could see who doesn't live entirely in his own head. If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times—we really must get a cat. I suppose you weren't listening, as usual. I shall go to Mrs. Smallwell's and purchase one tomorrow. And your supper's getting cold."

By Liz Williams
Illustration by J.K. Potter



Slowly, I gathered up the pages of the manuscript and descended the stairs. I did not know to what manner of being the eye might belong, nor was I eager to find out. I wondered whether it had been a manifestation of the visions which so frequently veil my waking sight, like the spirits of dreams, or simply the low, late sun glinting through a windowpane and catching some fragment embedded in the wall. There are times when I find reality and illusion hard to differentiate and, indeed, I maintain that there is little difference between them; that what to the run of mankind is held to be a fancy is itself the truth.

As the days went by, I became increasingly preoccupied with the great work on which I had so recently embarked. I sought nothing less than the depiction of the human soul itself, but though I could see this so clearly in my vision—a brilliant petalled growth like the lotus of the East—I somehow could not quite grasp it through the medium of paint. I became immersed in my work, only coming out for meals and sleep, and then reluctantly. Catherine, who was as a rule the most patient of women, declared herself tired of my absent rejoinders, often delivered many minutes after her original question had been asked, or not at all. She would, she informed me, be removing herself to her mother's for the next few days, leaving me to steep in the juices of my own imagination. I confess that I greeted this pronouncement with some relief. When this curious state that is such a mixture of blessing and affliction comes upon me, I am best left to myself.

I have seen stars that have the redness of an eye, formed from the great and glittering dark.

Catherine went, therefore, and I was alone. I fear that I hardly noticed. Ignoring the manuscript that I had promised to typeset, I worked all that day in a fever, painting furiously as the vision possessed me. And yet I could not capture with mere daubs the form that I perceived so clearly, nor describe the phosphorescent transformations of the light through which it moved. Perhaps words might more readily ensnare them … and with that thought, I threw down the brush and sought the sanctuary of sleep.

It was already late into the night, and the arms of Morpheus eluded me. I tossed for a while, then sank into an uneasy doze. When I next awoke, I was no longer alone. Something was crouching by the side of the bed. I lay still for a moment, still hazed by sleep. My left hand was enclosed in a hot, dry clasp, but I could feel the rasp of something like a dog's tongue across my inner wrist and then a sharp sting of pain as the thing began to sip my blood. Gripped with sudden, belated horror, I tore my hand away and struggled upright. My assailant rustled back into the shadows, but I could still see the scaled arch of its brow, the curve of its massive shoulders, and the pursed mouth, so akin to those soft anemones found in the rock pools along the south coast. It was taller than a man. Its eyes sparked coal-hot in the firelight. I could not utter a single word.

The creature dropped its great head for a moment, like a dog chastised by its master, then rose to its feet and padded softly from the room. It is hardly startling that I slept poorly, if at all, for the remainder of the night. I lay in a kind of trance, clutching my wrist, and my head filled with a dull ache. Toward dawn, when the first thin winter light fell across the floor, I arose and went numbly down the stairs.

The visions that had so besieged me over the course of the previous day were now wholly absent, and I felt as heavy as the clay of the London street beyond. The only emotion which I could muster as worthy of the name was an increasing sense of dread as the December evening grew on. I was, indeed, most reluctant to go to bed at all, and at length resolved to remain sitting in my armchair before the fire, with the lamp and the firelight to comfort me. Congratulating myself on my wakeful vigilance, I promptly fell asleep.

Yet once again, I awoke to the stealthy touch of an unhuman hand upon mine, and opened my eyes to meet its crimson gaze. The creature and I stared at one another for a few moments. Its thick hide was the color of old blood, and its eyes were filled with sorrow and something more. As I sat motionless before it, its tongue flickered out in a convulsive, greedy movement, and then it looked away.

"What are you?" I asked hoarsely, finding my voice at last. "What is it that you want?"

"Blood," it said. Its own voice sounded rusty, as though rarely used.

"Are you some demon, then, sent to persecute me from the heart of the Pit?"

It shook its armored head from side to side.

"I am nothing," it whispered. "Nothing at all. I want only blood." Its harsh voice rose to a roar and I shrank back into the armchair. "Blood!" it cried, and was abruptly gone. I sat, shaking, until the dawn. That morning, I resolved that if it were to come again, I would be ready for it.

The sleepless nights, and the stress and terror of the creature's visit, were taking their toll upon me. Normally a man in the most excellent of health, I felt weak and ill, and my very bones seemed to grind in their fragile casing of flesh. I could not afford a further depletion of my exhausted resources. If my nocturnal visitor wanted blood, I decided grimly, then blood it should have.

I dragged myself into the street and summoned one of the urchins who haunt the print shop in the hope of earning a few pennies by running errands. A boy came eagerly forward, for I was known to be generous with money—hoping thereby to ensure that my commissions would arrive safely at their destination and not be permitted to fall into the gutter during the pursuit of some more distracting game.

"Mr. Blake," the boy called as he approached. "You've work for me, then?"

"Yes, indeed," I told him. "Though I am afraid it is of a rather different order to your usual errands. I want you to go down to Smithfield for me, and procure—" I broke off, aware of how it sounded.

"What?" the boy asked, puzzled.

"I want you to bring me a large bowl of blood."

The boy looked nonplussed, as well he might. "Blood, Mr. Blake? What sort of blood?"

"Pig, cow, sheep—it doesn't matter. You see," I improvised hastily, "you know that I do paintings and drawings, things of that sort, don't you? Well, I am experimenting with a new type of pigment, and it has come to my mind that with a proper fixative, blood might provide me with the color I'm looking for."

It sounded like a lunatic explanation to me, but the boy's puzzled gaze seemed to clear. It seemed that my reputation for artistic eccentricity was standing me in good stead.

"Very good, sir. I'll go now, shall I?"

"That would be most helpful," I told him, thrusting a few pennies into his small, pale hand. "Here's some wages in advance, and the rest when you return."

The boy ran off, and I went slowly back inside the house.

An hour later, there was a knock at the door. I confess that it startled me considerably; I had fallen into a doze at the fireside and when the sound came I leaped like a scalded cat and looked wildly around me. Then I recalled the boy's errand, and went hastily to the door. He was standing in the darkening street, holding the bowl before him. There was a smell of snow in the air, but the blood steamed with the odor of hot iron.

"It's fresh," the boy assured me. "Pig."

"Excellent," I said. I took the bowl from him and placed it carefully on the step while I paid him the rest of his commission. Then I carried the bowl indoors and took it upstairs. I glanced in upon it several times over the course of that uneasy evening, but the blood remained undisturbed and undiminished, merely congealing in the chilly air. It was growing colder, and the fire seemed to make little difference to the temperature of the room. Shivering, I took myself to my bed fully clothed and sat there, sleepless.

I did not see him come. One minute, there was only myself amid the firelit shadows; the next moment, the creature was there, bending over the bowl of blood like a hound at the end of the chase. I saw the long, serrated tongue flicker out once, scattering drops of pig's blood across the whiteness of the wall, and then the creature turned to me.

"It will not do, you see," he said, sadly.

"You said you wanted blood," I whispered. He padded across the room and crouched by the side of the bed. His head was level with my own, yet he seemed different, somehow: more skeletal, his skin dulled brown like rust or a scab. He said, "Thank you, for what you have tried to do for me. But it will not do. The blood must be that of a man."

"Tell me," I said. "Why should that be so? I see in your eyes that you do not wish to harm me—" and as I spoke, I knew it to be true. The creature sighed.

"It is part of my punishment, to sip the blood of men, even though I have come to hate such a craving."

"I asked you once before," I said. "What are you? What manner of thing?"

"I told you once before," he said. "I am nothing. I am the smallest of all small things that are. I am the ghost of a flea."

I gazed at the huge, bowed head and the hunched muscles of the shoulders and back.

"Small," I said, "is not the word that comes most immediately to mind."

"Nevertheless," the creature replied, "that is what I am. Yet, I was born a man, long ago, in a hot and ancient city. I lived my life in the service of one whose name is known to you in the holiest of books, a king. They knew me as the one behind his throne; my power was limitless, and I did not scruple to abuse it." He paused and something old and dead flickered behind his eyes.

"To abuse it?" I asked. "How?"

"I have craved the blood of others since I was little more than a child. I would seek it out, in the public executions, and in more … private … amusements, such as a child may make unobserved. When I grew to the stature of a man, and earned my place in the city, I would have those who had taken my fancy brought to me and entertain them far from the eyes of others."

I swallowed. "Entertain them? Do you mean you tortured them?"

"I told you," the creature said, "I craved blood." Our eyes met. He went on, "And then there came a time when I was witness to more blood than lay within the depths of that yearning. The city fell to an army from the south. The king fell beneath enemy swords; the halls of the palace ran red. I tried to flee, but I was not long in following my master. They cut me down as I ran. I choked on my own blood and I thought it was the end, but the faith in which I had never believed proved truth after all."

"You do not mean the Christian faith," I stated.

"I do not. I felt my soul split into three and whirl out across the desert sands like shadows, and the last little core of that soul was brought before those who judge." The creature frowned. "Even now, I remember only darkly. Great presences in a greater hall, and my soul plunging down against the balance of a golden feather. … But they sentenced me to life, not death, and granted me my greatest wish. They told me that since it was the blood of others that I had yearned for and sought, my yearning would be fulfilled. They cast my soul into the spirit of a flea, to sip the blood of men and learn to hate it." The creature grimaced. "And so I was dead, and free to go, and I walked on my silent ghostly feet from the halls of the dead and out into the worlds that lie beyond. I wandered through the vastnesses of the universe, but somewhere, out in the wastes that lie between the stars, I lost what little soul I still possessed. It slipped away from me, and I was nothing more than a ghost at last, a shadow that could speak and move and touch, but had no place." The ghost paused. Its crimson eyes grew quiet, like a coal that falls through the grate to die in the ashes. "My first and only love drew me back to the world. I scented human blood, running red from war and murder, and I came at last to the lands of the living. I wandered in the city for a time, stealing blood where I could find it, and then one day I met someone. He was not a human. I do not know what he was; he was bending over a dying woman in the streets of Tyburn and his face was filled with light. I caught him by the corner of his robe and pleaded for his help. He stared at me for a long time when he saw me, and then he smiled.

"'If you can find a man,' he said, 'who can help you find the soul you have lost, then he will put you on the road to Heaven.'

'Who?' I asked. 'Who amongst the living can even see me, save as an incubus in the night?'

'There is such a man,' he said, 'A visionary, one who walks between the worlds. His name is William Blake. And temptation will be placed in your way: to steal his blood—and more. If you take his blood, then you will steal his soul also, at the moment of his death.'

'That is not what I want to do,' I protested.

'Then let us see if you can indeed resist it,' he said, already fading into air, and soon he was gone. Dejected, I made my way back out into the city, and several nights after that, I heard a man speak the name of William Blake: a madman, a mystic, he said, who experienced visions and lived in the city. Thus I sought you out."

"And you want me to help you?" I asked. "Help you to find your soul?"

The ghost nodded. "They say that you among all men may see where others cannot. All the way to God, so they say. But I can no longer contain my need for the blood that has drawn me back to the world and holds me yet. I have sought you out and sipped your blood; I could not resist it, it has been too long. I am tied to you now. And if I steal your blood at the moment of your death, then your own soul will be mine." His eyes shot sparks in the darkness, and I was even more afraid.

"Listen to me," I said. "It is true that I have talents that few others seem to possess, although it is also true that these are granted to me by God's grace alone and no innate quality of mine. I will try to help you. I will travel to the world beyond, and see if the Lord in his infinite wisdom may grant me an answer. But there is one thing that you must understand: If I am to place myself into this state of trance, I must not be physically weak. I will not have you battening on me like a leech. I want your word—not the word of the flea, nor of the man you used to be, but your own promise, as you are here and now."

After a long moment, the ghost bowed his head. "You have that promise. I will not take the smallest drop of your blood. Not now. But if you should fail. …"

"Very well, then," I said. "And now you must go."

When it had gone, my head felt clearer than it had for some time. I rose from the bed and went to kneel by the window, there to

Continued on page 96

once

No gift comes without a price. You just have to decide if it's too high.

That familiar feeling found Bailey Threadgill on a stretch of highway just north of Atlanta. It began, as it always did, as an itch deep in his brain, an irritation that filled his head and then crept across his scalp, the pin-prickling of blood seeping back into closed-off nerves.

Bailey absent-mindedly scratched his head and glanced over at Miriam, dozing beside him, her head bobbing to the rhythm of the road. In the back seat the twins murmured quietly to one another. Just minutes before they had abandoned I-85 for this two-lane highway, nearly deserted, stretching into the distance like an unraveling string.

After the itching, the image came, blooming in his thoughts like an exotic flower: a bicycle overturned, back tire still spinning; a rag doll, dirty, one eye missing; a girl, five or six years old, coal-black hair whipping about her face.

Sometime today he'd see them in real time: the bicycle, the doll, the little girl. Bailey knew because premonitions were a weekly occurrence for him.

Miriam moaned in her sleep and one of the twins—Tess—said, "No I dint!"

"Girls," he said. He slid his hand across the seat, searching for Miriam's. He'd had these feelings since the summer he turned eight. He and his brother Benny had been jumping off the roof of their house. They took turns leaping from the eaves, grabbing hold of a nearby tree limb, and riding it down. It had been fun until Bailey missed the limb and crashed to the ground, his head snapping against an exposed tree root.

He'd been unconscious for a minute or two and when he came back, his head crawled with pins and needles, itched madly. He looked up at Benny and said, "You're gonna get it tomorrow."

"Only if you tell Momma and Dad."

"Not for this," Bailey said, holding his head. "Dad's gonna find out you snitched one of his *Playboys*."

A door creaked open and he had been allowed a glimpse inside. His premonitions came frequently and were always glimpses into the portals of the mundane. The paper would be late tomorrow. The right front tire would be low next Wednesday. Beets and peas would go on sale at Kroger's.

BY JACK SLAY, JR. ILLUSTRATION BY TORAN KOTTER



"I been expectin you some

Miriam called him Seer of the Pretty Obvious.

The feeling was similar to déjà vu—but rather than that strange doubling of time, his was the feeling that you would be here again, that you would do this again. Does that have a name too? Bailey thought. Have the French named this sensation as well?

His thoughts frayed as the twins launched into their 57th argument of the morning.

"Bess farted! Oh geez, everyone roll down their windows!"

"I did not! It was Tess!"

"Was not!"

"Was too!"

Bailey groaned and said, "Girls, please."

The entire trip, not yet two hours old, had been like this. The vacation had been his idea, a respite from the beck and toil of city life. Of course no one could agree on where to go. Miriam thought the mountains would be nice; the twins insisted on Disney World. Bailey had championed the beach.

Bailey knew he'd win, having already seen gulls wheeling in the sea breeze and an ice chest of beer half-buried in the sand. Sometimes the premonitions were handy.

Still, no one was completely satisfied and they had left Atlanta in silence. Just outside of the city they'd been delayed by an overturned hearse, its load of empty caskets spilled across the highway. Sitting in dead traffic—sweat like acid dripping into his eyes; Bess steadily kicking his seat—Bailey had watched the Georgia Highway Patrol drag the coffins to the shoulder.

"Wow, some foreshadowing."

"You didn't see this, did you?" Miriam grinned and he shrugged his shoulders.

Once traffic cleared, the trip got better. Bess read a Nancy Drew, and Tess played the alphabet game. Miriam dozed. Just after his premonition, Miriam stretched, yawned, and looked over at him with sleep-happy eyes.

"What'd you see this time?" Miriam had always known when he'd seen. "Something in your eyes," she had told him. "Like you've just opened an interesting closet."

"A bicycle, a doll, a girl."

"Ooh, sounds exciting." She settled her head on his shoulder. "My husband the clairvoyant. Wake me when you see next week's Lotto numbers."

Then, from the back seat:

"Did too!"

"Did not!"

"*Too!*"

"*Not!*"

Bailey glanced in the rearview mirror. "Hey! Don't make me pull this car over!" he said, and immediately regretted it.

The twins fell back, sulking.

Then Bailey saw the first sign: SEE TWO-HEADED SNAKE, it said, letters in garish red against a faded white background. NEXT EXIT. The sign was a simple board pounded into the highway's shoulder.

A hundred yards farther on another sign flashed past: BLIND BEARS, and in smaller letters just beneath, SIX-LEGGED CALF. THIS EXIT. Then another: BIG ED'S BAR-B-Q AND SOUTHERN ZOO.

"What if we stop here for lunch?" Bailey spoke rapidly, gliding into the right lane. "Eat some barbeque, tour the zoo."

"Oh great," Bess said, rolling her eyes. "Retarded animals." Tess giggled.

Bailey guided the Explorer into the exit and no one complained. At the intersection, he followed a large red arrow onto an unnamed highway.

LEGLESS LIZARDS. ONE MILE.

"Please tell me you haven't seen this," Miriam said.

LIVE MONKEYS. SCREAMING PARROT.

"No," Bailey said. "But you're going to stub your big toe tomorrow."

On the nearly deserted stretch of highway, Bailey's anti-déjà vu ambushed him again. Bailey absorbed the scene, his scalp tingling, his mind itching: the road barren; a landscape consumed by kudzu; a single clapboard house, its yard dirt, its porch leaning, half the roof caved in. He would have thought the place abandoned, but fresh laundry floated on a line and a child's bicycle lay overturned, its back wheel spinning; nearly under the wheel lay the doll. And then the girl again, her face open and innocent, her eyes shining. Then she and the feeling were gone, leaving only an echo in Bailey's head.

"Another one?" Miriam said. "Already?"

Bailey shrugged. He almost never had more than two a week—but two or three in a single day was not unheard of.

An 18-wheeler blew past, its slipstream rocking the Explorer. The last sign loomed before them: BIG ED'S THE MAN!, and in smaller letters underneath: THE BBQ AINT BAD EITHER!

"Here we go," he said.

Big Ed's, a small building on the brink of collapse, sat on the edge of a kudzu-infested ravine, vine-wrapped telephone poles and dead trees rising from the green sea like primordial serpents. To one side stood a rickety pyramid of ramshackle cages. None looked sturdy enough to hold a legless lizard much less a blind bear.

Bailey groaned and thought, *Oh man, what have I done.* The Explorer creaked to a stop, dust billowing about them. Residue from the image floated in his brain like flotsam, his brain itched. He studied the cages, thinking of the girl.

Bess said, "Good thing we gave up Disney World."

"So where are the animals?" Tess said.

"Won't know until we find out," Miriam said, opening her door. "Let's see what this Big Ed is all about." Squealing, the twins tumbled out and dashed across the graveled lot. Bailey eased out, stiff from the ride, and followed his family.

At first he thought the cages were empty, but stepping closer he saw the castaway remains of a ghostly zoo: the sloughed-off skin of a rather large snake (whether it had been two-headed Bailey could not tell), a cracked watering bowl, a small pile of what looked like rodent dung. No six-legged calves, no blind bears, no parrots. What a rip-off, Bailey thought.

"Man," Bess said, "what a rip-off."

"OK, this wins: This is officially the worst vacation we've ever been on," Tess said.

"Now, girls," Minam said. "Your father couldn't've known."

"Sure he could've," Tess said.

"Yeah," Bess said, "he could've *seen* it."

"But I reckon he's too busy telling us we're gonna have extra homework tomorrow."

"Or that Ellie Green is going to get a pimple on her nose next week."

"Or that the neighbor's dog will be constipated in July."

The twins laughed, faces lifted to the sky. Leering monster faces, Bailey pounced on them. The twins shrieked and sought cover behind their mother.

"Stop! Stop!" Miriam shouted, laughing "Someone'll see us!"

Still grinning, hands cupping the backs of the twins' heads, Bailey looked beyond the cages. In the distance he could see an elephant train of mountains, purple shadows humped against the sky. He thought of the girl in his head again. She seemed two or three years younger than the twins, her hair so black it looked blue in the sunlight.

time now."

"Hey, what's that over there?" Miriam pointed past the lost zoo. Just beyond was a small, fenced-in clearing. Miriam and the twins moved around the empty cages. Bailey followed.

At first he thought the pen was as empty as the cages—then he saw a shape. It shambled forward two, three steps, then fell still again. At first he thought it was a dwarf, a pervertedly shrunken human. He took an involuntary step backward, and in the moment he realized what it was, Tess said, "A monkey! Lookit that, Bess! It's a monkey!"

At once, pins and needles prickled across his scalp, and the image bloomed: the grassless yard; the bicycle tire spinning into eternity; the girl, her eyes dark, dark holes. This time another form: the shuffling figure of a man. He gripped the girl's arm with pale, skeletal fingers. The girl looked directly into Bailey's eyes.

"—think it's safe, Bailey?"

His brain itching. The girl like a lost daughter.

"Bailey?" Miriam, calling as though from a great distance.

"What?" he said. "What?"

"Oh, man, look." Bess. "I think the monkey's blind."

Tess moaned. "Poor thing. He needs a mother."

The monkey remained motionless. A tether looped its neck, the skin beneath it crusted with scabs. Its fur was matted, snarled with bits of twigs and trash, a fast-food hamburger wrapper stuck to the bottom of one foot. Even worse, a milky-white film coated its eyes, which oozed a yellowish pus.

"That poor creature," Miriam said.

"Why's it like that?" Tess said, tears in her eyes. She took her sister's hand and together they stepped closer.

"Can we pet it?" Bess said. "Or maybe feed it something?"

The chimpanzee sighed heavily, its shoulders slumping. For a moment Bailey knew the animal's pain, felt the litany of endless days reeling out before him. He looked away from the monkey's cataract eyes and cupped a hand behind each twin's head.

"I don't think so," he said, "but I'll asked inside."

Reluctantly, the twins turned away. Miriam smiled, mouthed a kiss. He smiled back. Behind them the monkey shuffled, made no other noise.

Inside, Bailey let his eyes adjust to the cool darkness. Shapes swam up, formed into shelves of canned goods, an icebox, a counter. What sat behind the counter Bailey first took as a mutant, a woman three times normal size. She was huge, yard upon yard of dimpled flesh, squatting like a creature from some alien invasion movie, an old-timey cash register perched in front of her.

"How do," she said, waving, the flesh on her arm flapping like an empty sack.

"Holy—" the twins said simultaneously and Miriam clamped a hand over each mouth and moved them to the potato chip rack.

"Hep yourself," the fat woman said. "We probly got most of what you need. We don't git just a whole lotta visitors this time a day, not usually. Heat, I reckon."

"Isn't it awful?" Miriam said. "Is the sun not trying to fry the world these days?"

"You right, ma'am. Why, when I was a girl—"

"Excuse me," Bailey said. For a second, he considered asking the woman about Big Ed, asking if *she* were Big Ed. And where was all the promised barbeque? And what about that damn monkey? Instead, he said, "Do you have a restroom?"

"Right over yonder, young man," the woman said, winking at him.

The restroom was a toilet and a sink in a room not much bigger than a closet. Bailey relieved himself, listening to the murmurs of Miriam and the fat woman's conversation. He washed his hands, splashed water onto his face. Peering at his eyes in the mirror above the sink, he fully expected the feeling to take him once more, waited for the girl to come wandering through his mind, the prickling of his flesh. His reflection gazed silently back.

Then the mirror wavered, fogged. Bailey gripped the sink, thinking he might be having a spell of some kind. A shape loomed out of the fog. The mirror cleared and the fat woman stared out at him.

"How do?" the figure said.

Bailey backed against the wall. "What's going on?" He could still hear the burble of conversation outside the door. "What're you doing?"

"You a seer, aint you? I could tell it soon as you walked in. Actually, I been expectin you some time now." Her voice was slow and thick, as though she spoke from a dream.

"How'd you know about my visions?" He felt stupid talking to a mirror, felt he was being made the butt of a joke. But he was powerless to leave.

"That what you call them?" The fat woman nodded. "You know they's evil in the world. Creatures—*demons*—walk this earth, waitin for innocent souls to wander by. It's up to folks like you and me to stop em."

"Me? Demons?"

"You got the seein. That means you one of the ones."

"One of the ones? I don't believe in demons."

"But you believe in evil, don't you?"

Bailey didn't answer.

"All's it takes is once. That's what all this seein has been leadin up to. You don't think they just happened, do you? You been bein prepared."

"Prepared for what?" Bailey felt cold inside. He wished they had gone to Disney World. "What're you talking about?"

"You'll know when it comes," the woman said. "Seers always do."

"When *what* comes?"

"Once, Bailey Threadgill. That's all it takes."

The fat woman vanished and the mirror cleared. Bailey reached out a tentative hand. The mirror was warm to the touch but otherwise felt like any other mirror. He shook his head and opened the door.

"The entire world seems crazy," Miriam said and the fat woman nodded.

"Why, my sister-in-law was murdered just a year ago. She run a little store just like this one up in the Smokies and someone come in and blew her brains out. Shot her right in the forehead. And then—get this—took *nothing*. It was like they was killing just to kill."

Miriam looked up. "Hey, sweetie."

Bailey looked at the fat woman, but she betrayed no recognition. She said, "What can I get you today?"

"Nothing. Not right now."

Bess and Tess bounded up and tossed a collection of chips and candies onto the counter.

"Can we get this, Daddy?" Tess said.

"We promise to be extra extra good in the car," Bess said.

Bailey said, "Sure." He watched the fat woman.

She began to ring up their purchases, the ancient register ringing dully with each item. "Are you two not the purtiest things?" she said, grinning. "Why I could just eat you up!"

"Is that monkey blind?" Bess said.

"You mean the Admiral? He aint completely blind, but he don't see too good either."

"Can we pet him?" Tess said.

"Law, I wouldn't. The Admiral's about as mean as an outhouse rat. You don't wanna get too close." She looked at Bailey. "All's it takes is once."

Bailey stared back at her, said nothing. He laid money on the counter and took his change when the fat woman offered it. Her eyes revealed nothing.

Once again the tires hummed over the pavement of the endless Georgia highway. The twins munched happily on chips. Miriam studied the passing landscape.

All's it takes is once.

A talking mirror? Demons? Bailey glanced into the rearview mirror; the twins stuck out their tongues. He stuck his own out and thought that this was the *once* he had to be concerned with. A man only got a chance to do life once. And the fat woman was right: The whole world was crazy; it rarely gave second chances. Miriam reached over and patted his hand. He smiled, not looking from the road, and pledged that he'd be a better father, a better husband.

The land on either side of the highway fell away in a tangle of scrub, kudzu eating everything, growing right up to the highway in places. They'd been driving for over half an hour when the kudzu momentarily disappeared, giving room to a tiny clearing.

In the middle leaned a lopsided clapboard house. The dirt yard was nearly vacant: an ugly black automobile sat on blocks in one corner, gray laundry hung limply on a line. Bailey realized that poverty was everywhere the same, people he would never know struggling through lives he would never understand.

He saw the overturned bicycle, the back tire slowly spinning. Beside it lay the tiny rag doll. This was it then, the image, what had filled his mind all day. He waited for the fat woman's "once," he waited for revelation. But nothing came, this moment exactly like every other one.

He turned to catch a last glimpse of the passing house: the useless black car, the lifeless doll, the bicycle tire spinning aimlessly.

Where's the girl?

The road ribboned onward, kudzu ate the world.

Ahead, at the peak of a small hill, two figures shuffled along the shoulder, shadows silhouetted against the sky. Passing them almost before he had fully noticed them, Bailey turned again to watch them slip past. He briefly registered Miriam's quizzical gaze and then saw the man: a hulking overcoat of a man, his face a mottling of shadows. Beside him was the girl: a small stick-like figure cowering in the man's shadow, her face as pale as milk. She looked straight at him.

The Explorer crested the hill and they were gone. Bailey glimpsed them again in the rearview mirror, the girl's hair whipping about her face, the man's grip tightening on her arm. Then there was nothing in the mirror except sky.

"You see that?" Bess asked.

"Yeah, that looked sort of creepy," Tess answered.

Surprising himself, Bailey pulled the Explorer onto the shoulder and stopped.

Miriam said softly, "Bailey, what's going on? What're you doing?"

He took her hand and squeezed. "I'm not sure. But I don't think I have a choice."

He turned and said, "Girls, I'll be right back. Watch out for your mother."

The day seemed hotter, the glowering sun floating just above the horizon. The man and girl, a couple of hundred yards away, plodded slowly down the hill, the girl's hand still gripped in the man's. A car crested the hill behind them, passed them, then hurtled past Bailey. He stepped against the Explorer and the slipstream tore at him, whipped his clothes about him. The car was a Japanese model, compact and low to the road, and still the blast from its passing was like a giant swatting him aside.

Bailey took a last look at his family, nodded with a certainty he did not feel, and headed toward the approaching couple.

Once.

What was he doing? Who made this his business?

Questions buzzed like tiny flies in Bailey's head. Sweat trickled down his back, dampened his shirt at his armpits and the small of his back. The feeling—ants crawling sluggishly across his scalp—lingered in his head.

When the girl and the man were within hearing distance, Bailey called, "Y'all need some help? Maybe a ride somewhere?"

The man said nothing. He was big, wearing jeans and a soiled T-shirt. His black hair was thick and unruly, going gray; his eyes were like holes. He walked as if he might until the end of time.

"Y'all broke down? Need a ride?"

Again, neither said anything. Bailey looked down at the girl. She looked to be five or six, small, her face smudged with dirt. *Her bicycle, her doll?* Bailey wondered and knew that they were. Her expression was one of resignation, a look much older than her years. She glanced up at him and the feeling was overwhelming. Her small body seemed to palpitate despair.

Help me.

Bailey looked around, confused. What could he do? Then they passed him in their shuffling, aimless gait. The man never acknowledged him, the girl's eyes found the ground again. Her foot hit a rock, sent it bouncing off the toe of Bailey's shoe.

"Look," he said. "All I want is—" He reached out and took the man's arm. Behind him, Bailey was vaguely aware of his family's eyes. Far away, something growled.

The man whirled, cutting off Bailey's words, and stumbled back, his face twisting in revulsion, instinct pulling him away from Bailey's touch. He let go of the girl's hand—and just for a second Bailey saw the prints laid across her skin, the flesh refilling with blood where the man's grip had been. He stepped back into the highway.

The growling filled the air and a monolithic shadow bore down on them, *roared* down on them. No longer thinking, Bailey swept the girl into his arms—her body as weightless as a pillow. He stepped back, kudzu twining about his feet, as the rising monster engulfed them.

An 18-wheeler thundered past, its horn blaring. Bailey fell, the truck's slipstream, like the winds of a hurricane, sending him reeling, the girl hugged to his chest. As he fell, he saw the man still stepping back—still recoiling from Bailey's touch—into the path of the oncoming truck.

In the second before impact, Bailey saw him *change*. As he fell, as that small, unknown girl buried her face in his shirt, Bailey saw the man's features ripple, saw his flesh slough aside, revealing a creature from a lost world. It was nameless and base and hardly human, something reptilian and primordial. In its last instant, its eyes—now yellow with slitted pupils—caught Bailey's. In those eyes Bailey saw a world dark, a maw opening, sucking all light into its blackness. The creature smirked.

The feeling—this time a hundredfold more powerful than it had been all day—took Bailey, a rushing across his scalp, a scalding in his limbs. Bailey screamed, the roar of the truck swallowing the sound as though it had never been.

Then the truck, brakes shrieking, hit the man, scooping him up as a child might pick up a rag doll. Bailey heard him scream, a cry of rage. The man—*the creature*—bounced against the pavement and the truck hit him again, sending him flying, pulling his clothes inside-out. The man slipped under the truck, a ragamuffin figure rolling endlessly, endlessly.

Bailey hit the ground, the small girl wrapped in his arms, and his world went dark.

Later, after the highway patrol had spoken in their quiet way to each of the Threadgills, after the ambulances had roared away, bearing the remains of an unknowable man, after the girl—her name Darlene—had been returned to her mother (a frantic woman in a clean but faded dress who kept telling everyone "I just went inside for a minute, just a minute"), after the stains had been washed from the cooling highway:

Bailey sat in the Explorer, his family quiet. He leaned heavily against the steering wheel, feeling the weight of the day bear down on him. He thought about the fat woman, about what he had seen fall under the truck.

Thank you, Darlene had said, her shy eyes flickering, the rag doll clutched in her grimy hands. *Thank you, mister.*

Miriam touched him on the shoulder and said, "Thinking how you did the right thing?"

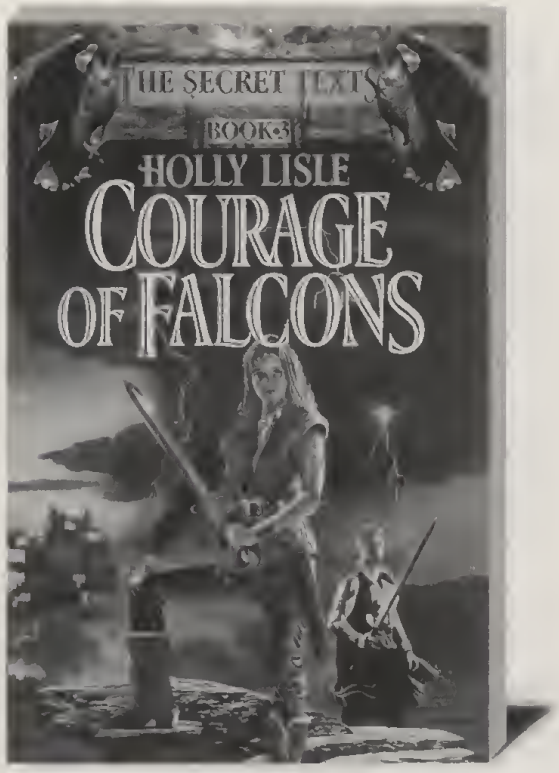
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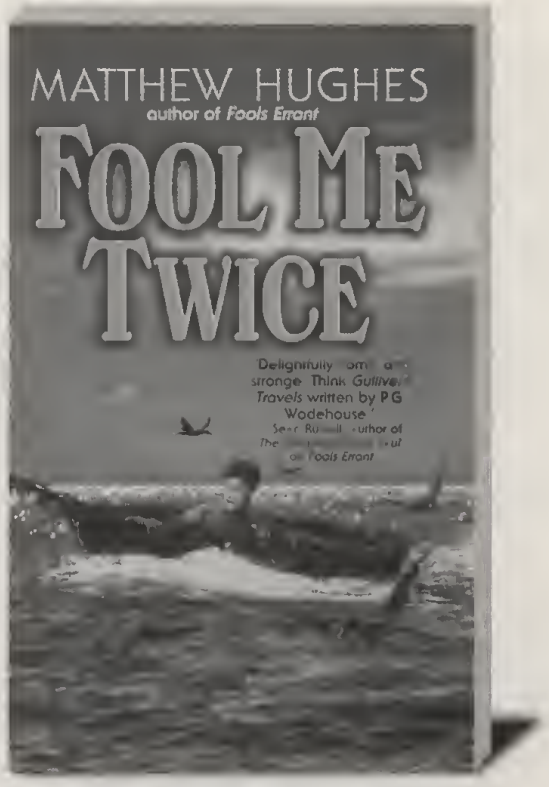
Bailey thought a moment, looking out past Miriam and into the sea of kudzu, seeing again that dark, dark world. "No," he said. He turned the key in the ignition, listened for a moment to the hum of the engine. "Thinking how I probably wouldn't stop again."

He glanced into the rearview mirror and eased onto the highway. ❧

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Patterns

By Mary Soon Lee
Illustration by Melissa Ferreira



All things must pass, they say. What they don't say is when.

1. Rain

A month after the weather patterns halted, Jessica ran out of cat food. She knew it wasn't much of a disaster compared to the problems other people were facing. But to her, staring into the empty cupboard while Bartholomew rubbed himself hopefully against her ankles, it felt like the end of the world, like the first time she heard her parents shouting at each other, like the morning three years ago when Dad left home.

Rain splattered against the kitchen windows, an endless, noisy, splashing assault, and she couldn't stand it a moment longer, couldn't, couldn't. She ran to the closet under the stairs, sat on the floor there, her hands over her ears, humming loudly to drown out the sound of the rain.

Jessica told herself she was behaving like a baby. She had just finished her first year at high school, and if her friends could see her now, they'd never let her live it down. But it still took her 10 minutes to convince herself to return to the kitchen. Nothing in the pantry seemed suitable for a cat, but at length she picked out a tin of sweet corn and emptied a quarter of it into Bartholomew's dish.

He sniffed at the corn suspiciously, his ears twitched back indignantly, and he stalked under the corner table. As he rasped at his fur with his tongue, his bones stood out. Jessica had put him on half-rations on the third day.

She picked up the rejected dish of sweet corn and set it on the table. Carefully, making each mouthful last as long as she could, she ate every kernel. Then she measured out another quarter of the tin of sweet corn and carried it upstairs.

She pasted on a smile before opening the door to her mother's bedroom. "Mom?"

Her mother lay in the bed, her dyed-blonde hair straggling limply, like a faded halo. She didn't look up when Jessica entered. From the blotchy red of her face, Jessica knew she'd been crying again. Mom had been crying off and on since they ran out of beer.

The bedroom had that sour smell Jessica hated. She set the sweet corn down on the dresser by the bed and reached up to open the window a crack.

Her mother shivered theatrically, pulling the comforter around her, though the room was clammy and warm. The outside temperature had stayed at a constant 70 degrees ever since the weather stopped changing. Inside it felt stuffy; the cottage hadn't had air conditioning even before the power went out.

"It's OK, it's warm outside," said Jessica as brightly as she could. "Just raining, that's all."

Her mother coughed, and Jessica tugged the window shut again.

"Would you like to come downstairs this afternoon?" asked Jessica. "We could do a jigsaw puzzle together."

But her mother just rolled over so that her back faced Jessica."OK. Maybe tomorrow then." Jessica left the bedroom and ran back downstairs to the kitchen, feeling happier as soon as she left, but guilty about feeling happy.

At one minute to one, she turned on the radio. The news hadn't changed—stay in your homes, the army is taking steps to restore order, there is no cause for alarm. Jessica wanted to believe the man on the radio, but how could all the winds all over the world keep on blowing in the same direction without some places running out of air? How could the temperatures stay the same, day and night?

At five minutes past one, she switched off the radio, wondering how much longer the store of batteries would hold out. Perhaps she should only listen once a week, but she couldn't bear a whole day without hearing another person's voice for at least a few minutes.

She crouched down by the corner table, stretching her hand toward Bartholomew. He forgave her enough to lick her fingers once. Encouraged, she decided to venture outdoors again. Maybe this time she would find another person, or some fruit, though it was only July. Maybe she'd even find a shop.

She put on her hiking boots and her mother's big plastic raincoat and took a bag in case she did find supplies. The path outside the holiday cottage had been washed away, water running in its place as if there had always been a stream there. So Jessica ignored the path and squelched up the hill, careful not to lose her bearings.

Twigs and logs littered the muddy ground; even the trees looked damply miserable. But it smelled cleaner out here, and the constant noise of water seemed to go with the forest.

Maybe she should look for straight logs and try to build a raft? If the rain went on long enough, the cottage might flood, and Jessica couldn't remember seeing any other buildings. They had only arrived at the cottage the evening before the weather patterns halted, and she remembered the car journey mostly as a bumpy, boring ride farther and farther from civilization. Mom had said it would be pleasant to get away from it all, and Jessica had pretended to agree, trying to ignore the crates of beer stacked in the van, kidding herself that this time things might change.

Mushrooms. Suddenly there were mushrooms all around, orangy ones with deeply fluted tops. Dad would have known exactly what they were and whether they were edible. When she was little, before Dad and Mom started to hate each other, they used to go for family walks every Sunday. Dad knew the names of all the plants and the birds, and he would give her a nickel for each species she could identify.

Sometimes, when she got several questions right, Dad would swing her up in the air and hug her and tell her he loved her. And she had been such a baby, she believed him. But if he *had* loved her, he wouldn't have gone away. Mom said Dad's leaving had nothing to do with Jessica but, in that case, why had he never even phoned?

She studied the mushrooms for a long time, but she couldn't decide if they were safe to eat. Finally, she left the mushrooms behind and walked on up the hill till her calves hurt and her right big toe throbbed where the boot pinched.

The trees opened out, and she saw clear down the valley. A wide gray ribbon marked the flood-swollen river. A road ran down to the river, disappeared into it, and emerged on the other side. Where the road met the river, several cars had been abandoned. On the far side of the river, one house had smoke coming from the chimney. But she couldn't see any people or any moving cars.

She squelched back downhill again, stopping twice to catch her breath. It was only when she got all the way back to the cottage that she noticed flashes of silver in the stream where the path used to be. She crouched by the stream—fish! There were silver fish, as long as her hand.

She ran indoors, stamping mud onto the hall carpet. No nets, so she grabbed a sheet and ran outside again. After half an hour fiddling with rocks and branches, she managed to drape the sheet across the stream's flow.

A fish stuck in the sheet. She reached for the fish, lost it. Another fish—and this time she hauled it in, the fish jumping and twisting in the folds of the sheet.

Early that evening, before dusk set in, Jessica put three of her catch into Bartholomew's bowl. He blinked in surprise, then gobbled the fish down. And when he settled himself against her feet in the bed that night, his purr filled the room, a deep and comforting rumble that made up for the lack of electricity.

2. Snow

Six weeks after the weather patterns froze, Mark met the snow. He had been making steady progress westward, avoiding the cities and the roads as much as he could. Now the snow fell gently around him, the tiny flakes melting as soon as they touched his face.

He pulled the waterproofed map out of his backpack, stared at it fixedly, though he had already memorized every detail. Only 80 more miles to Pryce's Hill along the route he had planned—and now the snow.

Mark refused to acknowledge defeat. He hiked into the white on white of the snow, only the soft crunch of his footsteps audible in this muffled world. After a quarter of a mile, visibility was down to 10 yards, the flakes coming thicker and thicker, coating his jacket. He sank knee-deep with each step. After weeks of hiking, he was in better shape than he had been since basic training, but, still, he was pushing 40 years old, and his knees and hips ached.

He paused to rest. Shit, this was hopeless, he was going to have to skirt the edge of the snow. Days, maybe weeks, added to his journey, and no guarantee that the snow wouldn't extend as far as Pryce's Hill. Shit, shit, shit.

He turned 'round and started heading back. If only Barbara hadn't picked this time to go on holiday, if only she hadn't chosen a spot hundreds of miles away. Hell, if she hadn't slept around in the first place, he wouldn't have ever left her, and then he wouldn't be tracking through the wilderness, wondering if their daughter Jessie was OK, wondering what Jessie looked like now, wondering why he had never once visited since the split. Three years living in the next town over, and he had never even visited.

He knew why he hadn't. All those notes Barbara sent him, two a week sometimes. Scented paper and wobbly hand-drawn hearts, and that self-pitying way she begged him not to desert them. And every time a note came, he remembered her with her

clothes off, humping one of his friends or the mailman or the pizza delivery boy; he remembered how each time she had sworn blind that it would never happen again.

He reached the edge of the snow and turned south by west.

He knew why he hadn't gone back, but it was funny how it took a thing like this, the whole world falling apart, more or less, to realize it wasn't any sort of justification at all. Maybe he was right to leave Barbara, but he should have seen Jessie. He had been so proud of himself for sending the custody checks, so virtuous that he hadn't let Barbara drag him down to her level.

Growing hot, Mark stopped, took off his coat, and tied it over the backpack to dry. He turned farther south—a mile or so extra on his journey and he could walk through forest, easier to avoid other people that way.

Above, the circle of the sun shone pale through thin cloud, like a promise of better times to come. Mark didn't believe in promises, didn't believe in God, and the weather-freeze hadn't shaken his unbelief. Some people claimed the freeze was a miracle, but some weird damn miracle it made. More like a machine broken down, waiting for someone to hit the reset button. But still his thoughts settled into a kind of dull pattern: Please let Jessie be OK, please, please let Jessie be OK.

He offered up his journey as a kind of exchange. The night he jogged through the thunderstorm, expecting to be struck by lightning at any moment. The young woman who stood by a crossroads, blouse unbuttoned, offering sex for a meal. The man with a gun who had tried to steal Mark's backpack—would have succeeded, too, except that the man wanted to gloat up close and personal, and Mark still remembered a few moves, left the bastard with a broken arm.

Please, please let Jessie be OK.

3. Rain

Rain on rain on rain. Barbara floated on a sea of misery and hopelessness, surrounded by the never-ending rain. Water streamed down the wet windows, splashed down from the roof, one day merging into the next, and still the rain. She told herself to get up and check on Jessica, but she was so cold, cold right through, and tired. She was 40 years old; she'd let herself go all to hell.

In the rain Barbara heard voices, her mother humming her to sleep, singing carols at Christmas, sweet but gone now. And Mark's voice, gentle in the beginning, gone too. And then the shouting, and the great wave of bitterness that ate her up from the inside out. A hundred tasks she had to do each day, but none of them mattered. She had wanted—what? Freedom? A job? A purpose beyond buying clothes and keeping house and looking after Jessica?

Jessica came into the bedroom with a bowl of cereal mixed with water. "Mom? Will you come downstairs?"

Barbara's throat filled with the rain, and she couldn't speak. Jessica would be better off without her. That was the truth she'd been hiding from. She was no good to anyone, least of all to her child.

That stung, how that stung.

She heard the door swing shut, Jessica running light-footed downstairs. Barbara sat up in the bed, steepled her hands together. She couldn't remember any prayers, couldn't pull her thoughts together clearly.

She stood up, shaky on her feet. It took her an hour, but she managed to get out of her nightdress and into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. She got as far as the upstairs hall, caught her ghoulish reflection in the tall mirror, stopped.

Jessica wouldn't want to see her like this. No one would want to see her. She was too late, years too late, to make up for what she had done.

Barbara walked back into the bedroom and closed the door softly behind her. She pulled off her jeans, got back into bed.

The rain washed away her thoughts. She dozed, woke to a harsh banging. Burglars—attackers—they were coming to take Jessica. She jumped out of bed, grabbed the bedside lamp, yanking the electrical cord out.

The banging stopped.

She ran downstairs, steadying herself with one hand against the wall.

Jessica stood by the open front door, staring at Mark. Neither of them noticed Barbara.

"Dad?" said Jessica.

"Jessie—you're OK." He stepped forward to hug her, but Jessica twisted free.

"Why are you here?" she asked coldly.

"I had to see you. I wanted to say sorry." Mark stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Right," said Jessica sarcastically. "You mean you wanted to share our food."

"No. Here." He opened his backpack, started taking out packages. "I brought matches, a compass, a knife, rope, salt—things you might need."

"Thank you." Barbara made herself walk over to the door. The hallway had lengthened impossibly.

"Christ," said Mark. "You look like a car hit you. Tell me you're not drinking again."

Jessica took her hand and squeezed it quickly. "Mom hasn't had a drink in ages."

"You can't do anything right, can you?" said Mark. "You've even got Jessie telling lies for you."

The tide of rain rose inside Barbara, but she wouldn't let it drown her, not this time. As levelly as she could, she said, "Is that why you came here, Mark? To list my mistakes?"

He stared hard at her. "No," he said finally. "That isn't why. I guess I'm sorry I spoke that way." He jammed his hands back into his pockets. "I'd like to stay with you both." He glanced down at Jessica. "I promise I won't eat up any of your food. Please. Let me stay."

How many times had Barbara wished Mark would come back, how many times had she prayed for it, begged for it—and here he was, on her doorstep, asking her permission. She wanted it so badly it cut her almost in two. But she didn't answer him. Instead she looked at Jessica, squeezed her daughter's hand. "Would you like that?"

"I guess," said Jessica.

4. Clear Skies

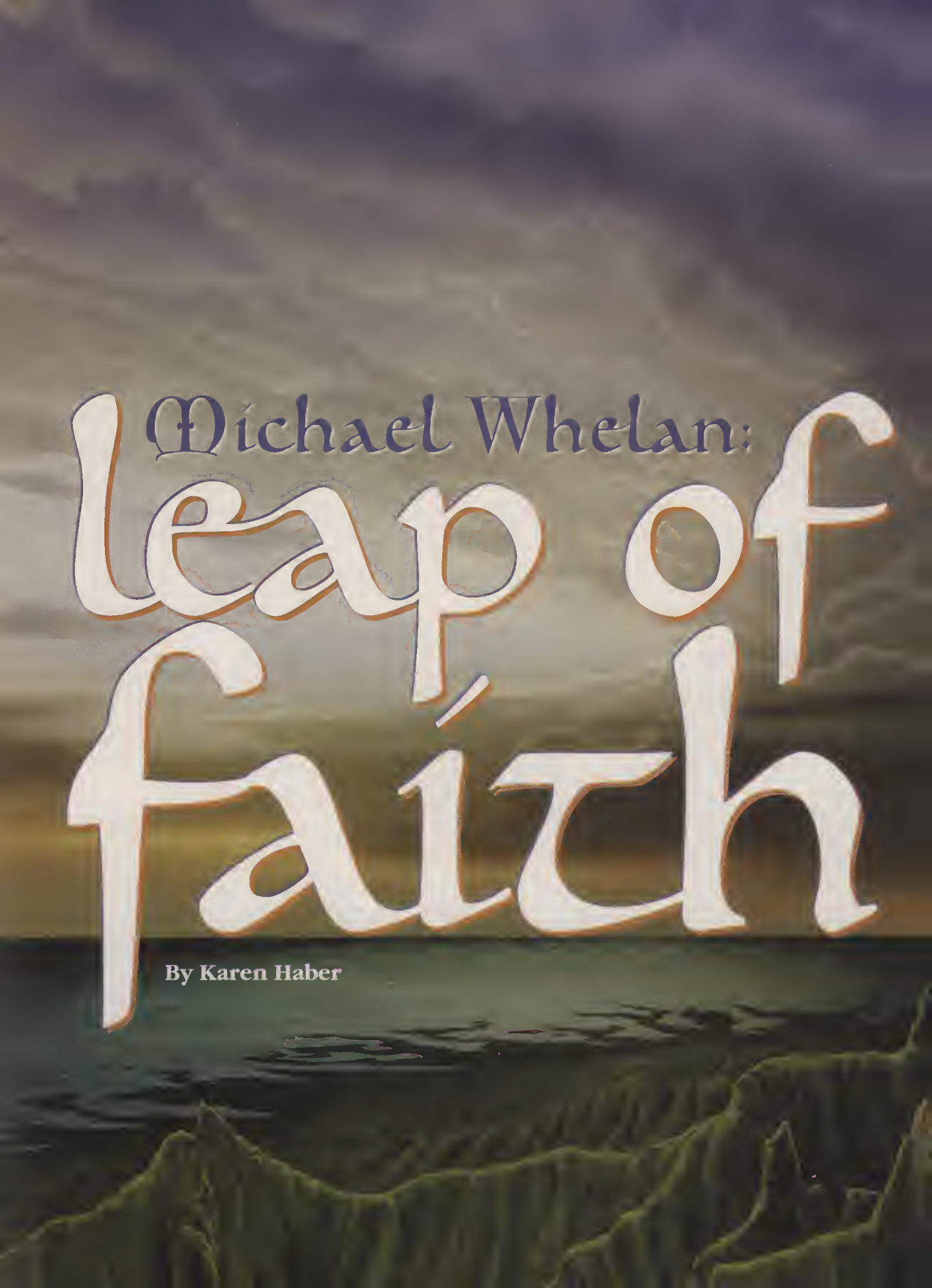
Two months after the weather froze, Jessica woke in the hour after dawn, starting up on the sofa. Bartholomew miaowed in protest. It took Jessica a minute to realize what had woken her. The rain had stopped.

She got off the sitting-room sofa, feeling lighter than she had in ages. A scrap of blue showed between the clouds.

Maybe, just maybe, everything would be OK. Dad and Mom were sleeping in different rooms and they didn't talk to each other much, but at least they weren't shouting at one another.

She felt so light, she hopped from one foot to the other. Wait—she didn't just feel lighter, she *was* lighter. She jumped, and her hand brushed the ceiling, 10 feet up.

As the sun broke through the clouds, Jessica jumped again and again. Now this, this was a lot more *fun* than the weather freezing. ❧


Michael Whelan:
Leap of Faith
By Karen Haber



Michael Whelan has received just about every honor in the illustration field you could name. Editors, art directors, fans, and art collectors love, applaud, and buy his work. Despite the universal acclaim, Whelan has put down his crown, turned his back on illustration, and, gathering his considerable artistic powers, has taken a giant leap into the unknown.

Michael Whelan, illustrator, has become Michael Whelan, artist. These days he's painting for himself, himself alone, and nobody else. It's a journey that began a decade ago.

"I'd illustrated for nearly 24 years," Whelan says, "and really, toward the end, I felt like I was just rehashing things I'd thought before. I became aware of a feeling of disconnection with what I was painting. Constantly experiencing thoughts and feelings which could find no expression in my illustration work. I was growing less and less satisfied with devoting all my time to illustrating. The artwork I was putting so much effort into was beginning to seem less important to me than doing work which more fully expressed my own thoughts and feelings."

Nevertheless, he kept his nose to the easel. Then it happened. He couldn't paint, simply could not do it. It was a complete artist's block, the first time he had encountered one in his storied career.

"I see now that it was clinical depression," Whelan says. "I was really stuck. What got me out of it was turning to personal work, painting *The Red Step*. On one level, that painting was literally about me trying to build a stairway out of my depression. And it worked."

Michael Whelan's artistic leap of faith has taken him into an exciting—and challenging—new realm.





previous spread: In *Erosion,* Whelan speaks "the pictorial language of symbolism." **above:** *Leap of Faith* is representative of much of Whelan's new work. **right:** Cryptic and intriguing, *The Reach* was a joy to paint. **opposite top:** *Hope* is embodied in a single figure against an intimidating backdrop. **opposite below:** *The Leavetaking* expresses symbolism with a romantic quality.

His salvation was also the beginning of a new journey. Whelan knew that he had passed over an artistic threshold with *The Red Step,* and that he couldn't go back. "It seemed obvious to me that it was time to seek more meaningful work. That need had become a driving force. I've got only a limited amount of time to get down the million of ideas in my head and so I feel that I should spend my time doing my personal work."

It's notoriously difficult—often impossible—for writers and artists to escape "genrefication" once they've been categorized. But since his pivotal moment, Whelan has certainly been giving it his best shot. Over the past 10 years he has created a body of exciting and intriguing visionary works that address his deeply felt philosophical, environmental, societal, and emotional concerns. In these new paintings he speaks the pictorial language of symbolism.

"The symbolism came about through my illustration work, where I tried to pack ten thousand words into an image. … It quite nat-

urally carried over into my personal work." Whelan admits that he has so much to say in his work that, often, he must consciously limit the symbolism in each painting.

In both scope and emotional content, Whelan's new paintings are breathtakingly ambitious, generous, and fearless. The artist isn't holding anything back. Hope and pessimism fight for ascendance, the former often embodied in a tiny figure set against a massive and intimidating backdrop. In series such as *Passage*, *End of Nature*, and *Avatar*, Whelan grapples with very personal perceptions: his bittersweet emotions about his children growing up, his fear for the environment, and his sense of the mortal clock ticking away.



His own bout with cancer hasn't slowed Whelan down. Now, fully cured, he looks back wryly upon the experience: "I was expecting some interesting visions from the morphine, but there weren't any. The hospital is a creative desert. I'm sure I'll have something to say about the experience in my work, eventually."

He spends long hours with his paintbrushes, striving to imbue his paintings with a sense of immediacy, and wants to move more fully into oil paints and abstraction. "I feel a desire to seek ever more simple and abstract compositions in my work. However, modernism has been hostile to symbolism as a means of communication, and I'll avoid strong abstractionism for that reason."

The ideas keep on coming. He captures his inspiration not only in sketches, but in literal written descriptions: "I've spent hours with dictionaries and thesauruses, trying to pinpoint certain ideas in language. I think it's really important to do so. I'm certainly not the first artist to see a connection between art and writing but there's something about delineating a thought in language that helps to crystallize it and preserve it for me. So writing is definitely important in this process. I think long and hard about my titles, too."

Sometimes the end result on canvas can be cryptic and intriguing, as in *The Reach*. Whelan recalls that work as a joy to paint. "The





model had gorgeous red hair, which I love to paint. I had to knock the colors down around her, including some of the colors in her skin tones, so that they wouldn't compete with the feeling of the bar of light.

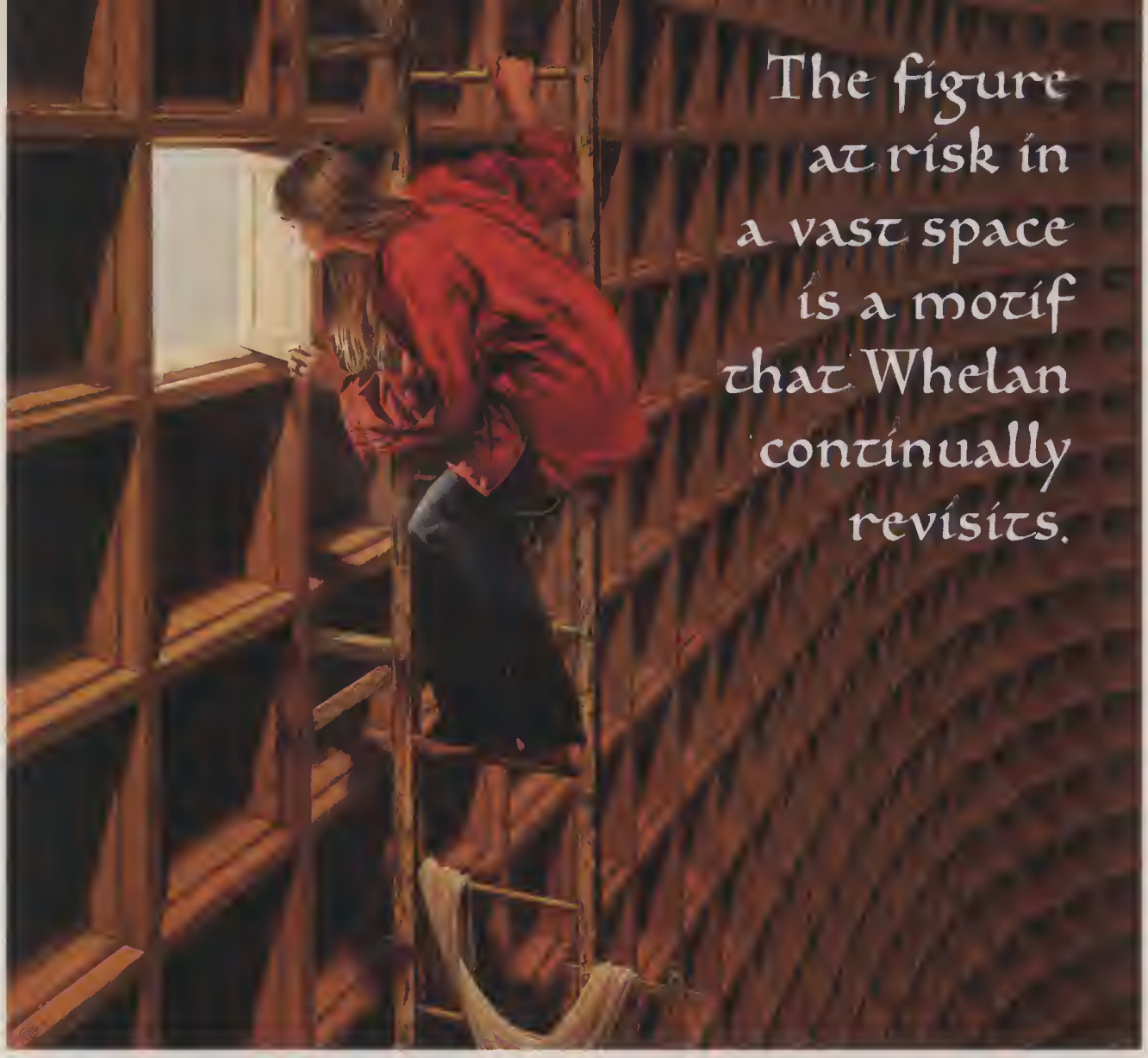
"And I love playing with perspective. Here was all of that strange perspective and texture. The genesis for that was when I was in Sydney, Australia, I came across a construction site where they were knocking down a building, surrounded by other buildings that all interfaced, edgewise, in different ways. The textures were fascinating. I tried to take a photo—which didn't come out—but I kept it in my head. I love those kinds of textures, those patterns."

Another work, *Pendulum*, is a surprisingly small painting which gives the illusion of monumentality and is filled with dark emotion. In it, a tiny figure is perched precariously in a threatening environment. The sky far above is glimpsed only as a thin blue line, as if Heaven is almost too far away to see. The tiny figure hangs on for dear life while holding a heavy lantern on a chain, peering down into the darkness.

"The title, in fact, the Latin root of the word, pendulum, refers to weight, and to decision making," Whelan says. "In those paintings where a figure has a weighted light—I've done three or four of those—the light means knowledge for me. I feel sometimes that knowledge is a weight or a burden."

The figure at risk in a vast space is a motif that Whelan continually revisits. Although it's tempting to cast the artist in the role of the subject





The figure at risk in a vast space is a motif that Whelan continually revisits.

here, these paintings are truly about larger concerns. "These paintings aren't about me, personally. They come from my feeling about current events. I'm very disappointed in the loss of feeling of progress, of societal progress. I don't see why we can't collectively make the decision to better the human condition. It seems to me, the more I've looked, that people have simply given up on it. And I think that's sad."

These deeply felt observations are what motivate him to paint. "I actually feel pretty good in my personal life. Of course, if I were totally happy with everything I wouldn't paint at all. I wouldn't do a thing if I didn't have this 'sand' in my shell, irritating me."

"Doing my personal work has opened up a floodgate of imagery, of symbolism. Joni Mitchell says that she defines artists as people who think in metaphors. That is so true of me: I see metaphors every time I take my daily walk. I come back with three or five new painting ideas that seem significant, and do sketches, and file them away. I'll probably leave behind books of material that explain what all the imagery in all my paintings is about. But I wouldn't presume to foist it upon the public. Removing all the mystery would, I think, be a big mistake. Still, someday I would really like people to know what I was thinking."

A thoughtful dreamer, and careful observer of the human condition, Whelan takes his own moral and personal integrity seriously, so much so that he once refused an important cover assignment because of his distaste for the subject matter in the manuscript. But that's all behind him now.

Whelan's new artistic tangent can be summed up in his painting, *Leap of Faith,* which might just be an autobiographical take on his new artistic trajectory. The painting is representative of much of his new work, displaying monumentality, rich pattern, dizzying perspective, and courageous emotional content. In it, a tiny figure launches itself out and away from a vast wall and into the void.

Michael Whelan's own artistic leap of faith has taken him into an exciting—and challenging—new realm. With both reluctance and affection we must let him go, and wish him a happy landing.

above: *Lumen 6* places a lone figure in a vast and complex patterned setting. opposite top: *The Watchtower* portrays an aspect of the human condition. opposite below: *Scale* places a lone figure in an architectural, but ruined, environment.

By Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff
Illustration by Michael Kerr

A HOLE IN HER HEAD

IS GREAT ART A DOOR INTO ANOTHER UNIVERSE? OR IS IT SIMPLY A SLICE OF PATHOLOGY?

Saffron bled to fire, bled to the color of a rising star, of the rising moon, of the sky at sunset, at dusk, at midnight. Indigo.

Here, fire again, there, a cascade of alien water—star color, moon color, indigo. Stroke upon stroke.

Swiftly, softly, racing the pain. Indigo, saffron, fire, star color, moon color, twilight, indigo. Stroke upon stroke. Racing.

Stroke … pause … stroke.

Karin laid the brush in the tray and sat back to look at the finished canvas. The brush, set down, would not be picked up again. The piece was finished, she knew it in a rush of exultation; today she had won the race.

She breathed in contentment and breathed out satisfaction and, in that exalted state, selected a fine sable brush, dipped it in thinner and rolled it in a small dab of alizarin crimson. Her eyes found the place she would set her signature—more of a seal, really—Krneson. She touched the brush to the wet canvas.

Colors blurred and ran beneath her eyes. The pigments seemed to dance, to wriggle, to change hue and form.

Dammit! Not again.

Karin set the brush back in the tray and climbed gingerly from the stool. She had taken no more than two steps when the vertigo hit. Crossing the studio was a challenge; she was weightless, her head pulling her toward the ceiling like a helium-filled balloon. She concentrated on each step, on putting each foot firmly flat on the floor, lest she float away in a moment of inattention.

The kitchen; she must reach it before the aura shattered under a bolt of pain.

She supported herself on the kitchen counter as far as the coffeepot, then leaned against it as she poured out the elixir. The carafe trembled in her hands, chattered against her mug. Its gleaming sides reflected a distorted portrait of anxiety—over-large eyes, furrowed brow, pale flesh.



Karin nearly gulped the coffee, barely noticing the heat. She was already rummaging in the cabinet above the counter for the second ingredient in the preventive spell. Her hand toppled the plastic bottle of ibuprofen off the shelf, made a belated attempt to catch it. Slow motion—her eyes followed the bottle to the counter. She waited till it had stopped moving to capture it, but was barely able to hold on. It took so long to finally get the medicine to her mouth, she was amazed that only two minutes had passed since the first warning wave of vertigo.

She swallowed the ibuprofen, praying her ministrations would be in time. They weren't. A blade of pain sliced between the hemispheres of her brain, nearly forcing her to the floor.

Karin crawled to her bedroom on hands and knees, feeling as if a lead weight pressed her head inexorably downward. She closed her shades against the wicked light, her door against the shock waves generated by the pendulum of the antique wall clock in the studio. Then, she lay down with infinite care and slept, exhausted.

She woke disoriented. Senses flickered on gradually—flesh told her it was cool, ears and nose announced that it rained. But her eyes refused to divulge whether it was morning or evening; the watery light creeping in about the shades was anonymous.

She moved her head gingerly. There was no vengeful shriek of pain. That happy fact encouraged her to turn her head to catch a glimpse of her bedside clock. 7:12. AM or PM? She squinted at the clock face. PM.

She was going to be late for her own opening. She catapulted out of bed.

Fifteen minutes later, showered and dressed, she grabbed her fanny pack and stepped out of her apartment into the hallway, where she tripped over two newspapers. She picked them up, barely glancing at them as she aimed them back through the door. Words caught her eyes—not headlines, but dates: Wednesday, October 16 and Thursday, October 17.

It was Thursday, October 17—7:30 PM. She was late for her opening all right—an entire day late.

She called her agent first, noticing as she did that the message light on her answering machine was blinking wildly.

"Karin! Where the hell have you been? My God, I was afraid you were dead. I tried to file a missing persons report this afternoon, but the police wouldn't let me. They said you hadn't been missing long enough. Jesus—can you believe that? As if an artist would miss her first major opening if there wasn't—Karin, what the hell happened? Where were you?"

The flood of words, delivered without a breath in between, finally ceased.

"Asleep," Karin said and felt silly. She could feel silly now that the pain was gone.

"Asleep. But I pounded on your door for.... You slept through your own—?"

"Yes, Rachel."

"Your first major gallery—"

"I know, Rachel."

Frustrated silence made static on the line.

"How did it go?" Karin asked.

"It ... it was fabulous. Better than even I expected. Toby is ecstatic because the critics will say he discovered you, you'll get some great reviews, some bemused reviews and at least one, 'I don't get it—is this woman the reincarnation of Roger Dean?'"

"They're nothing like—"

"Tell Mark Kellen that—and good luck."

"Did ... did we sell anything?"

Rachel chuckled. "Do you want the quantity or dollar amount?"

Karin held her breath. "I don't care, whichever."

"Oh, you're no fun. You sold five of the eight. You are now $68,000 richer."

"Sixty-eight ...? I didn't have anything priced—"

"The big one—*Quest for Fire*—went in a positively torrid auction."

"Auction?" Karin shook her head. "I don't ..."

"Two art lovers collided like bull rams, checkbooks drawn and blazing. It went for $20,000."

"Oh, my." Laughter bubbled out of Karin's throat, born of elation and carried upward on absurdity. "Rachel Cowan, was that supposed to be a metaphor?"

"I have a check. Shall I bring it over?"

Unease punctured Karin's elation. "So you can check up on me?"

There was a moment of silence. "Karin." Rachel's voice was entirely without humor. "I'm worried about you—can you blame me? You haven't exactly been yourself lately."

Waiting for Rachel to arrive, Karin considered that irony. Not herself. Inescapably true, and nothing testified more eloquently to that than the paintings she had just sold and the new one that sat on its easel in the studio.

She wandered over to it, turning on the studio lamps. The soft light washed over the canvas, bringing the colors to life. It was like switching on the lights in another universe. Up close, you might mistake it for a spacescape, but one without planets. A step back and you could imagine a sleeping landscape, but the colors—the vivid, fiery, midnight colors—belied that. Back another step or two and you looked at a cityscape. But what you might take as a thousand tiny lights, glinting from a thousand windows and strung down long boulevards, resided in buildings without angles and avenues that possessed no straight lines. Back up yet another step and a face came almost into focus, coalescing from the city streets, the hills and valleys, the star-stuff. It peered out of a canvas in which it did not live and into which Karin could not say she had consciously painted it.

The paintings she had just sold had been similar, though they showed other landscapes, other faces. She thought of them as soulscapes. They captivated her, drew her in, and pushed her away until she found herself on a pilgrimage, circumambulating the object of veneration, trying to comprehend her fascination with it. And they seemed to have the same effect on others.

They were not like her previous paintings—the ones critics had found uniformly pleasant but unexceptional and unevocative. "Likable" was the kindest word an art critic had used to describe her former work. It had sold in extremely modest amounts and for equally modest prices to people intent on matching a particular décor or color scheme. It was artfully framed wallpaper.

Her newer work demanded attention, evoked strong emotion in the viewer—and in herself. It had also begun to evoke these hellish headaches. Each new piece was a race with agony. And the agony stole her coordination, her coherence, and now, her time.

No, she was not herself. And yet, when she was creating this new art, she was bringing to light things she suspected were painted in her very soul. Didn't that mean she was more herself?

She was. Oh, yes, she was.

Tears welled and blurred the new soulscape. Worth it. Worth the pain. She wondered if pain wasn't a part of the process—as necessary to it as brushes, paint, or canvas. She knew it drove her. She suspected it made her work immediate, fierce, clean, and free from self-analysis or critique.

She tended to overanalysis, she knew—both of herself and her art. A mentor had once chided her for her sometimes tentative approach to the canvas: "For God's sake, Karin, embrace the Muse, don't give her a polite peck on the cheek!"

"I'm being careful," Karin had told him.

"Bullshit. You're not careful; you're ambivalent. Great art is never ambivalent."

When she'd whined to a writer friend about how difficult it was to shed that ambivalence, he'd told her, "While you're creating, don't edit. Don't even think. Just feel the work."

Because of the pain, she'd had to take that advice to heart. It was only a step or two behind her from the moment the first torrid rush of inspiration sent her scurrying for a fresh canvas. She heard its footsteps after every brush stroke.

She had not analyzed this mysterious gift beyond noting that there had not been any catalytic moment from which the change dated. There had been no moment of epiphany save the initial inspiration that had driven her to paint her first soulscape. It had simply emerged from her, replacing the mundane with the original.

When Rachel arrived with her check, Karin was sipping coffee and staring at a blank canvas, waiting for the moment to occur when she would pick up palette and brush and dive into her work.

"You see, I'm fine," she said. "I got lots of sleep. I feel great."

Rachel nodded, skeptical. "Fine. If you're fine, why did you sleep for two days?"

"It was less than 24 hours, Rachel. I had just finished a long stint at the easel. I had a migraine. I needed the sleep."

"You could have set your alarm."

"I had no reason to think I wouldn't wake up at a reasonable time."

"You missed your opening."

"There'll be others, won't there?" She was confident. No, she was pleading, begging the continued indulgence of her Muse.

"If you keep painting, you'll have more openings." Rachel strolled over to the newest canvas, drying on its easel. "Oh, by the way, the disappointed art buyer would like to talk to you about a commission. Is this the new one?" She shivered visibly as if someone had tickled her with a feather. "Eerie. Sometimes you scare me."

Sometimes I scare myself, Karin thought. Aloud she said, "A commission? I'm not sure I … I've never painted anything to order, Rache. I just do what I do."

"And Jackson Waterhouse likes what you do very much. We might show him this one. It's nearly as large a canvas as *Quest for Fire* and has similar light play."

Karin moved to stand next to her. "What if he doesn't like this one?"

Rachel's tone became slightly condescending, as if she spoke to a child. "Then we'll discuss the terms of a commission. Look, Karin, I know you've never done a painting on demand, but I can assure you, Jack Waterhouse is not going to dictate content or composition."

Karin laughed. "Of course not. I'm just going paranoid, I've heard other artists—"

"Sure. Artists who paint landscapes or portraits or still-lifes and therefore get asked to paint someone's favorite wife holding a pineapple in front of the view from their Aspen ski lodge." Rachel put a hand on her shoulder. "You don't do wallpaper anymore, Karin. You do … something unique. Can I ask you something?" She didn't wait for an answer, of course, the preliminary question was rhetorical. "What made you change your style so radically?"

She had done enough thinking about that to have a ready answer. "Nothing made me change. I just reached down a little deeper. Tired of painting pieces of décor, I guess." As she said it, she felt an insistent tug at her imagination. Her pulse quickened. "Look, Rache, I'm feeling a bit of inspiration coming on." She gestured toward the pristine canvas, hoping Rachel would get it and excuse herself.

"Go right ahead," she said. "Don't mind me, I'll just pull up a cup of java and watch.… Good Lord, don't look so stricken. I've watched you paint before."

Karin dog-paddled mentally. "Not since—" popped out of her mouth before she could stop it.

Rachel, being Rachel, understood the situation better than even Karin did. She fixed her with a cool, dark gaze and said, "I will leave if you want me to. But let me just say that the fact that you have turned out nearly two dozen great paintings and are about to roar off another would seem to indicate that your talent is not some fragile bit of luck that's going to evaporate if someone breathes on it. It's not made of gossamer and neither are you. Now, having said that…." She picked up her purse from the divan in the living room.

Karin smiled sheepishly. "Rachel, you're too astute. Please. Stay."

"You're sure?" The purse slipped back to the divan.

"Sure. Make yourself at home." She was already in motion, gathering up her palette and pigments. Already images were beginning to form in her head—like a doorway opening, letting in light, shape,

THE SCENE SEEMED TO LIVE, TO BREATHE, TO BECKON.

even sound, she realized. She was enveloped in it, imagining a stroll through a jungle dense with birdsong—at once familiar and alien.

Her hands shook slightly as she set up her palette, automatically picking colors. The strange bird voices swelled. She almost could see them—blurs of color as glimpsed through a slightly distorted lens. She loaded her brush and began to paint.

The jungle was velvet-dark and flame-bright. Arching trees wore lush colors Karin couldn't name. She scrabbled among the pigments, only half watching her hands. Her eyes were on the jungle; her heart was in the jungle. Above, a sky dappled through waving foliage. It was not a blue sky; it was a hue only dreamed of as sky—a creamy lavender.

Flashes of bright color snatched at Karin's eyes, led them on merry chases into shadows. She was gliding down a path, slipping between branches, could almost feel the soft slip of foliage against her skin. Almost, because there was yet the sensation of being a camera lens, of peering through a window into another place. She swept the camera here, there, her brush moving with a whisper of sound over the canvas. The scene she painted had captured her completely. It seemed to live, to breathe, to move, to beckon. She breathed and smelled, not turpentine, but growing green. The scene shimmered and rippled.

Then, with a suddenness that caught her breath in her throat, Karin looked into what could only be a face, though it resembled no face she had ever seen in life. It was a part of the jungle, or was superimposed on it, or was hiding in the very fabric of it. Then it fled, morphing into a fleeting blur that tucked itself neatly into the blue shadows.

Karin followed.

For a while, she was vaguely aware of Rachel's movement around her, but the painting subsumed that. She was in pursuit of the face, thinking only of capturing it with her brush. When it ceased to withdraw and allowed approach, she was ready, deftly picking up a new brush and loading it with fresh pigment. It seemed to her, now, that the face *wanted* to be captured.

A face, she called it, but it was neither human nor animal. There was expression in the pale, smooth oval. She wanted to capture that too—was it sadness, fear, loneliness—what?

"Hello," she said. "What can you tell me about this place, hm? What's your story?"

She had no sooner said the words than she was flooded with a wistfulness that hovered on the verge of sorrow. She applied it to the canvas. The face and its anxious gaze were swiftly fixed, and Karin, caught up in the moment, realized that all distinction between her vision and the canvas had been lost.

She couldn't sign this, she thought. She had not created it, but merely copied it from life. She lowered her brush to consider her next move. The face receded into the abstract jungle. She cried out in disappointment.

Behind her, Rachel asked, "Karin, what's wrong?" and she was distracted.

The pain was swift. It drove Karin to the floor with the force of a tornado's breath; she had no time to even think of the bottle of ibuprofen or the carafe of coffee. She heard Rachel cry her name and the sound of breaking glass and she was gone.

Down the rabbit hole.

She awoke in the pastel confines of a hospital room. IV tubes snaked from her left arm and hand. She felt light, insubstantial, hollowed out. If it were not for the carefully tucked bedclothes, she might have floated away, or at least bobbed to the ceiling, where encountering the air-conditioning vent, she might escape.

The jungle was gone, consigned to memory and canvas. The wretched pain was gone with it.

"You're awake!" Rachel, rising wraithlike from a bedside chair, might have startled her, had she the capacity to be startled.

"Hi," she croaked, smiled stupidly and added, "Ribbet."

Rachel didn't return the smile. "This has happened before, hasn't it? This is why you missed your Garfield's opening, isn't it? For God's sake, Karin, what's wrong with you?"

Karin rolled her eyes. They hurt. "Just migraines."

"Migraines? Dear God, I thought you'd had a—a seizure or a stroke or an aneurysm or—"

"I get the picture." Karin turned her head toward the inevitable bed tray. "Water?"

Rachel handed her the water in its baby puke yellow sipper cup and disappeared into the corridor. She reappeared with a Dr. Cain, who let loose a volley of questions. How long had she had the headaches? How often did they occur? Had she noticed a pattern—was there a particular thing that seemed to trigger them?

"A pattern?" Karin repeated.

"For example, do they occur just before your period or when you eat chocolate?"

"Good Lord, I should hope not. I eat a lot of chocolate."

Dr. Cain smiled. Good bedside manner. Kind, open face.

Karin decided to tell him the truth no matter how crazy it sounded. "They happen every time I finish a painting."

Dr. Cain's eyebrows rose. "Really?" He studied her for a moment, then made a note in her chart.

"You didn't finish the last one," Rachel observed. "You froze up like a statue. You didn't move until I touched you. Then you cried, 'Oh, no!' and collapsed."

Karin remembered. "The face was fading. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to finish it."

"The face?" Dr. Cain asked.

Karin felt her cheeks flush. "Did I say 'face'? I meant mood. The mood was fading. The inspiration."

"And when the mood snapped, the migraine came on?"

"Yes."

"Just before it hit, was your vision affected in any way?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was there … a strobing effect, tunnel vision, anything like that?"

The jungle filled Karin's mind. "Mosaic," she murmured.

"Excuse me?"

"It was like looking at a stained glass window or a mosaic. The canvas seemed to crack, shatter."

More notes scratched across her chart.

"Is that significant?" she asked.

"It may be. I won't know until we've run some tests. I'd like to schedule you for an MRI."

"A what?" Rachel asked, looking devastated.

"They want to take pictures of my brain," said Karin, and the doctor nodded.

"Magnetic Resonance Imaging," he said. "It will show us if there's anything in there we need to be concerned about."

Rachel's hand came to her throat. "What sort of anything?"

Karin noted wryly that she was taking this a whole lot better than Rachel was.

"A tumor, swelling, something of that nature," the doctor explained.

"My God," Rachel murmured.

Dr. Cain laid a comforting hand on her arm. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Ms. Cowan. I suggest you reserve judgment until the tests are complete and analyzed. That's what I'm going to do."

The MRI was an interesting experience that made Karin glad she wasn't claustrophobic. She lay within a huge metal cylinder that was more like a casket than she cared to think about, while a hundred rhythmically challenged native drummers soloed wildly to different music.

A mirror inside the cylinder allowed her feeble contact with the outside world; she watched Dr. Cain and a technician poring over their computer screens. The crawling light from the screens made it impossible for Karin to read those faces for clues. When Dr. Cain pointed, was it at something insidious in her head? When he spoke, was he diagnosing a tumor or was he just commenting on last night's episode of *ER*?

"The tumor appears to be benign," said Dr. Cain.

Only at the point of relaxation did Karin realize how wound up she'd been. She let out the breath she'd been holding and sagged back into the chair she'd taken in Dr. Cain's office. Seated next to her, Rachel echoed the motion.

Karin followed the tip of Cain's pen with her eyes, followed it to the backlit negative, to the bright, perfect ball of light that sat just inside the crown of her skull like a supremely well hidden Easter egg.

"It lies exactly between the two hemispheres of your brain and atop the sagittal sinus," he said, "which is the major blood highway to your brain. It's what we call a meningioma. Now, migraines are vascular headaches—they come and go with the blood tides, as it were. When you paint, you undergo extreme stress." He raised a hand when Karin's mouth popped open in denial. "I don't mean that in a negative sense. Let me put that a different way. Painting excites you. This restricts the blood flow a little bit as you tense up. When you complete a painting, you relax. Blood flows more freely. Theoretically, the tumor could impede it from doing that."

Karin stared at the perfect egg, couched inside the cartoon outline of her skull. It was about the size of a quarter. "Theoretically."

The doctor scratched his head. It was an unconscious gesture that Karin found far from comforting. "Well, if the structure were larger—much larger—I'd theorize that it was impeding blood flow. But, frankly, I don't see how this little guy is doing that. Still, it's the only suspect we have. The tests we did for Parkinson's disease came back negative."

Karin glanced away from the tumor to the doctor's face. "Parkinson's? Why? I thought this was migraine."

"The description you gave of the mosaic effect; the fact that Ms. Cowan said you were immobile for several moments until she touched you meant we couldn't rule out Parkinsonism or some other postencephalitic response. What you've described to me is asymp-

tomatic of either Parkinson's or migraine, strictly speaking. But as I said, the symptoms are real and the tumor is the only thing I see that could be causing them, as unlikely as that is."

"Do I need surgery?"

He canted his head from side to side. "Need is a strong word. The tumor may be something fast-growing that arose in the last six months, or it may have been there for years with little or no growth. There's no way to know for sure. We could wait around another four to six months and monitor you with MRIs, see if there's any growth. Or we could operate sooner as opposed to later and eliminate the risk. Tell me, have you changed your routine in the last year or so—started exercising more, less, differently, for example?"

Karin shook her head. "I'm a creature of habit, doctor. I get up every morning, go to the spa, swim exactly one mile, go to a histro on Columbus, have a latte and a biscotti, then go into my studio and work."

"Any irregularity in your menstrual cycle?"

"None."

"When you sketch, do you get the headaches?"

"No. No I don't, but I rarely get that involved in my sketches. I use them to block out paintings, to compose. Once I've got a basic layout down, I hit the canvas. Actually, I rarely sketch. Most of the time, I go right to the final medium." She shrugged. "When I sketch, the paintings aren't the same—not as … vivid. Not as good."

Rachel looked sideways at her. "Those little canvases you had lined up under the window in your studio—is that what you're talking about?"

Karin grimaced. "You noticed."

"I thought they were transitional pieces."

"No. Just failures."

Rachel snorted. "I'd hardly call them that. They were lovely paintings, if not as stunning as the others." She turned her head smartly to Dr. Cain. "Sooner as opposed to later, you said. How soon would that be?"

"Unless Karin has a reason to put it off, I'd like to move fairly quickly. Two weeks to a month, depending on schedules."

Karin nodded, feeling ill at ease. She had never had surgery in her entire life and the prospect of having her skull opened up was disturbing.

"Why weren't you completely honest with Dr. Cain?" Rachel asked as they drove back to her apartment.

Karin had been staring dreamily at the Bay Bridge. The question was jarring. "What do you mean?"

"When you were describing that last migraine experience, you talked about a face. 'The face faded,' you said. Then you corrected yourself and said it was just a mood."

Karin made a noncommittal noise.

"It was a face. You even spoke to it And it's in the painting."

It was in the painting … when you stepped far enough away that you weren't lost in the weird green wilds. Three or four steps back and the face came right out at you, perfect, pale and smooth, eyes large and watchful, mouth open in a perfect "o." Seeing it, Karin was struck with the absurd memory that when Rachel had distracted her, that painted person was speaking to her in words she had been on the verge of comprehending.

Rachel insisted on staying with her the entire three weeks leading up to her surgery. "Just in case," Rachel said.

Just in case she tried to paint something, Karin found. She had to content herself with visits to Toby Garfield's gallery, where she would eavesdrop on patrons praising or decrying the sensory overload her paintings evoked with their lush, wild hues and clandestine movement. She read the words of art critics. They were favorable words—no, better, they were wildly enthusiastic words. She was a phenom.

One evening only did Karin find herself alone. Rachel had to attend the opening of another client. She had tried to bully Karin into going with her on the grounds that her appearance would lead to good press for both painters. Karin pleaded fatigue, rubbing her temples and trying to look pathetic.

"No painting," Rachel scolded as she left.

"I wouldn't think of it," Karin promised.

Untrue. A week and a half without painting had been hell; her awareness of lost time, excruciating. She thought of nothing else; she stood in her studio, picking up her brushes one by one and putting them down again, considering the painting left unfinished by her last "attack." As if to rebuke her, a dull ache circled her skull. The remembered pain was enough to discourage her from using her stolen time to complete the painting.

Instead, she lined all the paintings in her studio up along the front wall beneath the one enormous window and studied them. They formed an anomalous group, the earliest ones so different from the newer pieces, it hardly seemed they could be the product of the same hands. All but two of the paintings were older, part of her more realistic past. Three, done on smaller canvases, were the works Rachel had commented on. They'd been done from sketches, but while they were not as mundane as the two early pieces, they lacked the disturbing intensity of the works she'd done on pure inspiration. The remaining two—the half-finished junglescape and the nightscape she'd finished the week before—stood at the end of the continuum.

And it was in that continuum that she made an impossible connection. The onset of the migraines precisely matched the transformation in her work. Like that transformation, the headaches had settled in gradually—so gradually, Karin hadn't seen the link.

She sat on the divan in the studio, stared at the row of canvases, and cast her mind back over the past year. Dr. Cain had asked her if anything in her routine had changed. It had. She had moved from almost slavishly sketching out every idea in pencil to putting color directly on canvas. In between, she had hit a transitional stage during which she sketched until the Muse moved her to the easel. She had been methodical before. Systematic. Careful. Moved by the Muse, but not driven by it. Now she was driven. Flung at the canvas, or pulled to it. She threw herself into the work, into the world inside the canvas.

OK. So, what did that mean? That the migraines were linked somehow to her surge of creativity? Or that the tumor was?

"Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Karin murmured.

Had to be the tumor. The tumor was just there. Had probably been there for years. The tide of creative energy she'd fallen into had simply stressed her system. She had adopted a much more immediate, visceral way of pursuing her art and the migraines were a side effect. This new way of working called so much out of her, placed her under so much stress, that the blocked sinus became engorged with blood, resulting in pressure and pain. Simple.

Except that Dr. Cain was still skeptical that the meningioma was triggering the migraines, and Karin could not say that she understood what had caused her recent supercharge of inspiration. She knew only that one day, some months before, the quality of her inspiration had changed slightly; she had painted beyond herself and had gotten a wretched headache to go with the intriguing painting she had produced. Since that day, her drive had increased, her painting had put on wings, and her headaches had become debilitating.

But that would change, she told herself, when Dr. Cain removed the tumor from her head.

And what else might change?

The stray thought made her queasy. She pushed it down. It was absurd. The tumor might cause migraines, but that was all it caused. It was ridiculous to even think that it had also caused her to become a better painter.

It is to laugh, Toby would say.

Karin got up from the divan and moved down the row of paintings. She stopped before the unfinished one, feeling the pull of its raw spots as she felt gravity pull her to the earth. The face peered out at her, half imagined.

Her hands shook, wanting the brushes as they might want a lover's touch. She knew what caused the migraines now—stress, overexcitement. She could control it. She could hold herself back.

SHE LOOKED FOR THE FACE SHE KNEW WAS SOMEWHERE IN THE SCENE.

She picked up her brush box stealthily, as if Rachel, across town, could see her. She shook off the ludicrous guilt and set up her palette, choosing her colors with care—blues, greens, purples. She loaded her brush with pigment, raised it to the canvas, and stared out into a desert.

At least she thought it was a desert, the shapes were right, but the colors were all wrong—too vivid, too sudden.

Irrelevant, her mind told her, because you didn't put a desert of any kind on this canvas, you painted a jungle.

By instinct, she looked for the face she knew was somewhere in the scene—that was in all the other imagined scenes. She found it peering through the branches of what might be a desert shrub or a peculiar mineral formation or something else entirely. The face was turned toward her, seeming perplexed, as she was perplexed.

"Where's the jungle?" she asked aloud, and felt incredibly stupid. "I need the jungle. So I can finish the painting."

It struck her how utterly insane this was; she was holding a conversation with a creature of her own invention. But, no, that wasn't strictly true, because this wasn't her painting, this was … well, a desert scene. Which she hadn't painted. Yet. Maybe it was a wannabe painting, an idea whose time had come.

And maybe she was hallucinating. In fact, she must be hallucinating. Either that, or she had painted a desert without intending to do so—and without remembering she had done so.

Dr. Cain hadn't mentioned hallucinations.

In the unpainted desert, the face had moved. It now seemed attached to a body of sorts. She was struck by the absurd idea that he/she/it was pointing at something out of sight within the canvas. This was followed by the equally absurd idea that she could follow where the guide led. If only she would.

She teetered on the edge of the moment. On the verge of motion. Pressing forward, reeling backward. And on the point of choice, she closed her eyes—barely a blink, really—and wondered if she could get the jungle back some other way.

It was simply there when she opened her eyes.

She didn't pause to ponder—that would have been a futile waste of time. She simply worked the painting, swiftly at first, conscious of time passing, of a race being run. But no, it had to be different this time. There was no point running the race if there was no hope of winning it. She slowed her pace deliberately. Took time to caress the colors, smoothing them across the canvas, teasing them into place around the alien face.

Alien. Why had she thought that? But it *was* alien—as different and apart from the real world as sun from moon.

Finished, she sat back, lifted her little liner brush, and rolled it in thinned alizarin crimson. The completed scene was eerily beautiful. Possibly her best to date; the otherworldly foliage/not foliage seemed to grow into three-dimensional space. *Trompe l'oeil*—a trick of the eyes. She chuckled at herself for being fooled by it herself to the point that she had, for even an instant, thought of following the creature of her own imagination into a scene she hadn't painted yet—hadn't even contemplated painting.

Karin signed the painting carefully. Straightened. No pain assailed her. Elation fluttered in her breast. Forgetting her promise to take it easy, she turned to look for another clean canvas.

The pain struck like a sledgehammer, exploding behind her eyes in a literal flash of glory. Then every scintilla of light was sucked from the world.

She came to in the Intensive Care Unit, connected to a battery of machinery. Liquids pumped in and out, every tiny function was being monitored.

"Damn," she said.

Rachel, sitting in the chair next to the bed, gasped and dropped the copy of *People* she was reading.

"Caught you," Karin croaked.

"Caught me?" Rachel was on her feet and punching the call button in one fluid leap.

"Can't believe you'd sink to such cheesy reading material."

Rachel didn't rise to the bait. "Karin, how in God's name could you possibly do that? You knew what would happen. Sometimes, I swear, you're as irresponsible as a child. You don't need an agent; you need a mother."

"It wasn't irresponsibility," Karin protested. "It was…. It wasn't something I could control. I had to try to finish it. I felt like I was that close."

"That close to a straightjacket."

"I didn't think I'd get so … drawn in. I didn't think I did. I paced myself."

"For all the good it did."

Dr. Cain and a nurse rolled in then to check, poke, prod, and reprove. That was followed by yet another MRI. One that resulted in Karin being remanded to the hospital until her surgery.

"The structure has grown, Karin," Dr. Cain told her solemnly. "By half a centimeter. That's more than I would have expected in the short time since we last checked. I'm scheduling you for an MRI every morning between now and your surgery date."

Karin, much chastened, gave herself over to the nurses and technicians without complaint. But the next morning's MRI produced what Dr. Cain referred to as "anomalous results." The tumor had decreased in size so that it was only marginally larger than it had been during her original MRI.

"I've never seen anything like it," Cain said, "either in practice or in the literature. None of my colleagues has seen anything like it, either."

"These are not comforting words, coming from one's neurosurgeon," said Karin.

Dr. Cain shrugged, a gesture Karin found no more comforting than an admission of ignorance, but he smiled for the first time during the interview. "You're one in a million, Karin. You may get written up in the *AMA Journal*—or at least your head might. The good news is that the structure doesn't seem to have compromised adjacent tissue. The bad news is that every time you have one of these episodes, it

may get a little bigger. I think you need to avoid having another episode." He gave her a disconcertingly direct look. "Are we clear on this?"

Karin picked at a piece of fluff on the sleeve of her bathrobe. "Yeah, I get it. No painting."

"Bingo," Cain said. "Try reading. A little TV, maybe."

With due ceremony, Karin was tucked back into her room where Rachel, smile falsely bright and encouraging, told her that Toby Garfield had sold two more of her paintings for extravagant amounts. She also told her the art critics thought she was brilliant, and produced a review column to prove it. She left the column for Karin to read—something to help her get through the days till she could be home again, painting again.

The column, written by Mark Kellen, a critic whose praise Karin had yearned for but never received, was titled "Who Are You and What Have You Done with Karin Arneson?" She settled down and read.

"So I was wrong," the columnist admitted. "Karin Arneson is not the reincarnation of Roger Dean. She's a completely unique animal. Hence the title of this column. I've seen Ms. Arneson's work over a period of several years. I once thought I might buy a piece and put it in my dining room. Nice. Safe. Nothing there to distract from the food or ruin anyone's dinner. Over the past months, though, the lady has surprised the hell out of me several times over with paintings that are unlike anything I've ever seen on any art gallery wall.

"No, art fans, Karin Arneson paintings and prints are no longer something you want anywhere near your dining room or breakfast nook, unless you like stained tablecloths or having to hand out airsickness bags to your dinner guests. Ms. Arneson's latest can bring on vertigo, euphoria, possibly even hallucinations. So if you're an agoraphobe or suffer from motion sickness, I suggest you forego a trip to view this artist's work. On the other hand, I'd hate anyone to be deprived of the experience. Take your Dramamine and go anyway. It's well worth the risk."

The article went on to describe a couple of the paintings currently in Toby's gallery, and Karin soaked up the heady praise, realizing, not for the first time, that a critic's words could also bring on vertigo. In this case, they also brought on the urge to paint.

She clamped down on the desire, picked up a book, and read. But the prose of a favorite fantasy writer put pictures in her head and the pictures demanded to be realized. When Rachel visited just before lunch, she nonchalantly asked for her pastels.

Rachel gave her a cold stare. "Do I look that stupid?" No pastels were forthcoming.

When her lunch tray arrived, Karin asked the student nurse for paper and a pencil. The girl smiled apologetically and said, "They told me you might ask for stuff like that. I'm sorry. I can't. Doctor's orders."

Karin fumed

"Look, I'm bored stiff," she told the next nurse she saw. "Can I take a walk or go into the courtyard or something?"

"A little exercise would be good. But you're not to go near the bookstore or the gift shop

She watched, too, the overzealous so-and-so. Karin was forced to flee to the courtyard, where the neo-Spanish architecture and nodding cypresses only fueled the forbidden yen for pigment and canvas. She fought the impulse until she glimpsed a fellow inmate happily writing letters in a sunny corner. She cadged some unlined paper, lifted a pencil from the nurses' station, and strolled nonchalantly back to her room, both items tucked into the pocket of her bathrobe.

She had been timing nurses all morning, noted that they seemed to arrive every 30 minutes or so. She could do a lot in 30 minutes and the drive to do was almost overpowering. Just the thought of lifting a pencil, a brush, a pastel, the mere savor of setting it to page or canvas was … she searched for some way of explaining it to herself. It was delicious, exhilarating, breathtaking.

The 3:10 nurse arrived and departed on time. And after that train left the station, Karin hung in the quivering moment of anticipation, waiting to see if she would cave to the dread and delight of paper and pencil. There was no reason for dread, really, she told herself. And no danger. She'd never had an "episode" while sketching. There was no reason she would now.

She sneaked out her supplies, slid her tray into place, and settled the paper on it, bringing the courtyard with its march of cypress and arches to mind. It twisted subtly, becoming something indefinably to the left of real.

Surprised and bemused, she began to sketch.

Not long after, an unscheduled nurse broke into her secret garden. Alerted by voices just beyond her door, she hid the drawing under the tray's paper placemat. The nurse checked her vitals and left, making a note in her chart. She waited breathlessly until the door swung shut, then brought the forbidden forth from hiding.

Color. The grays and blacks and whites she had sketched seemed faintly tinted as if she'd sketched in colored pencil, not an office supply issue Number 2. She trembled, touched the graphite gray lead to paper and drew rapidly, joyfully, pain the furthest thing from her mind. Buildings and gardens and walkways grew, fantastic, from her pencil tip. Colors spread, vivified.

"You again," she said, spotting a familiar face. "What are you, some sort of cosmic Tour Guide?"

She sketched the face. In her fertile imagination, it seemed concerned.

"Don't worry," she told it. "I'm taking it easy." But her insides were quivering and her pencil was sweeping through the landscape with increasing ease. It was like ice skating on a smooth winter pond. But the color spoke of spring or summer.

There shouldn't be color, a sharp, nagging little voice complained.

She ignored it.

You're hallucinating, it said.

She laughed at it.

You should tell Dr. Cain, it said.

You should shut up, she told it, and watched the colors pour onto the page from the dull gray lead.

Her Tour Guide seemed vexed. She tried to smooth the face, soothe it, but the pencil was inadequate to the task.

"What's with you?" she asked, and the Guide stepped out of his penciled place and gestured at her.

She froze. Warning or invitation? The sudden, insane idea that she could step into her own work was unbearably strong … and wonderful. Still, she hesitated to cross that threshold.

Her pencil continued to scurry, the Guide pleaded silently, ambiguously, and the paper became too small for the vision. The colors escaped the page, the garden shooting up in wild profusion like a psychedelic nature film on fast-forward. In moments, she was overgrown, overwhelmed.

The pencil stopped moving; the colors did not stop with it.

When they did the MRI, Karin was laughing with elation and had to be sedated. The structure had increased by two centimeters during her episode. After the MRI, with Karin conscious, it collapsed back one.

"It increases with every seizure," Dr. Cain told her in the quiet of his office. "It pumps up like a balloon, then deflates. But it's measurably larger after each inflation."

"It wasn't a seizure," said Karin.

"Karin, I think Dr. Cain knows more about seizures than you do." Rachel sat in the chair next to her, pale and tight-lipped.

"True, but I know more about me and about this. It wasn't a seizure."

"Karin, really—"

"You've never seen a tumor like this one," she said. "Isn't that what you said?"

He opened his mouth, hesitated. "No, I haven't. But I do know it's dangerous. And potentially fatal. I've moved your surgery up. We'll start prep immediately."

Karin sat up straight in her chair. "What? Wait—"

"For what, Karin?" said Cain. "For it to become inoperable?"

"You don't understand."

"What don't I understand?"

"It's not ..." she stopped. She was going to say, "It's not a bad thing," but realized how crazy that sounded. She also realized that she didn't understand either, didn't know what to say. *You can't operate, Doctor. It's not a tumor, it's an interdimensional Tour Guide, a portal to inner space.*

Was that what she believed it was?

rep took hours, during which she was under constant supervision. She was kept from paper and pencil with the same zealousness and concern a depressive might be kept from belts and sharp objects.

In pre-op, Rachel was with her, holding her hand. "When you go under, just think about what it'll be like after. You'll get back to your studio. Back to your art. Back to your future. Think of all the brilliant canvases you're going to paint, Karin. Pain free."

A needle pricked her arm and she thought, suddenly, clearly: *But there won't be any more brilliant canvases. I'll have no Guide.*

She opened her mouth to scream, to protest, to beg them to call the surgery off. But she was gone before she could do any of those things. Her last coherent realization was that the surgical team was into rock and roll. The strains of "Born to Be Wild" ushered her into darkness.

She spent the week after in the hospital—two days in ICU, three on the ward under observation. In ICU, she tracked her stay with a bizarre countdown of every IV line or shunt removed from a hand, a foot, a wrist, an ankle, an arm. Lift-off came when her catheter was removed and was fueled by the news that the tumor was, indeed, completely benign. She orbited to the bathroom and back, feeling like a conquering hero.

Except that her head sloshed as if it were full of liquid.

"My head sloshes," she told one of the ubiquitous young doctors who came to learn at Cain's feet and who mimicked their master by regularly poking and prodding and pondering her chart. "Is that normal?"

The smooth-faced young man—Dr. Tso, according to his badge—gave her a bird-bright glance and asked, "Does it slosh all the time or only when you do this?" He waggled his head back and forth.

"Well ... um ... when I do that." She repeated the waggle. "And it goes popple-popple-popple."

She knew she sounded like a five-year-old. Wearing a hospital-issue stocking cap with alternating cream and mint-green stripes, she felt like one too. Hell, she felt like a five-year-old cartoon character—Charlie Brown maybe. Her head must surely be too big and round for her body. She giggled.

Dr. Tso's face lit up with a broad grin. "Interesting," he said, and left the room, shaking his head and murmuring, "Popple-popple-popple."

Karin had to wait for Dr. Cain to appear to find out that the liquid was merely her brain's self-defense mechanism and that the popping sound was air that had intruded into her open cranium during surgery.

"It'll take a while to dissipate," he warned. "And you may snap, crackle, and pop for a year or more."

Karin grimaced. "Great. And in the meantime, my friends can legitimately call me an airhead." She neatly intercepted Dr. Cain's answering smile by adding, "Will it come back?" Was she anxious or hopeful? With emotions scrambled by anesthesia, it was hard to tell.

He folded her chart to his chest. "I don't know. As I said, we've never seen anything quite like it."

She licked terminally dry lips. "What ... what was it like? I mean, how was it different?"

He looked down at the chart, unreadable pressed against the front of his white lab coat. "Unusual. A tumor is different from the surrounding tissue. Denser, with different absorption properties. Which is why we use special isotopes to locate them. Your tumor had a layer of this denser tissue, but it was ... wrapped around a hollow core. Like a ... like a tennis ball."

"Hollow," she repeated. No alien Tour Guide. No sublime jungles or deserts or gardens that were none of those things. No interdimensional doorway. Hollow.

Out in the ward, there were anti-inflammatories to be taken, along with potent dosages of Vicodin to dull the pain. Karin spent most of her time in a semihallucinatory state of irrational euphoria, during which she watched CNN compulsively, albeit only half-consciously, learning that James Earl Jones's voice, crooning "This is CNN," could turn her bones to jelly. She slept fitfully, sitting upright, and dreamed that the Tour Guide spoke to her in James Earl Jones's voice. She couldn't remember what he said.

When Rachel took her home, it was to Rachel's house they went. It was clear Karin was not supposed to think about paintbrushes, pencils, canvases, paper, or anything else that might be found in a studio.

Rachel needn't have bothered, Karin thought dispassionately. She had thought of none of those things since coming up from anesthesia. She was almost afraid to.

"Dr. Cain says you can go home when you're capable of taking care of yourself. Translated into Rachel-ese, that means when I'm convinced you're capable."

"Rachel, I'm not" A child, she'd been going to say. "... going anywhere," she finished lamely.

She stayed with Rachel a week, during which she received candy, flowers, a new set of sable brushes, and visits from friends who tried not to tax her strength and who chirped about her getting back to work. Toby Garfield was the worst, playing the stern taskmaster, telling her she'd best get back to work cranking out paintings for his gallery.

At the end of the week, she was reluctant to leave her "halfway house"—something her perceptive friend didn't miss.

"What's the matter with you, Karin?" she asked. They were in Rachel's car, Karin tugging at the new, more stylish stocking cap. "You've been moping all morning. I'd've thought you'd be ready to run all the way back to your studio, screaming with boredom. Aren't you dying to get back in the saddle?"

"I guess I've gotten used to being waited on hand and foot," she lied.

Rachel wasn't deceived. "Bullshit. You're afraid."

"What? What are you talking about?" Karin felt as if she'd been stripped down to the baseball-stitched bald spot on her scalp and put on public display. How could Rachel possibly know the lay of her inner landscape?

Rachel put both hands on the wheel, but made no move to start the car. "The tumor is gone, Karin. Gone. No more migraines. No more hallucinations. No more lost hours or lost days. Your hair will grow back, your head will stop sloshing, and you'll stop looking like Ali McGraw in that dreadful, soppy movie."

"Oh." Karin smiled weakly. Her real fear remained hidden. "I thought I looked like Oliver Twist."

It was only 15 minutes to Karin's apartment—15 minutes of hell in which Karin allowed dread to take hold of her. She hated the

thought of walking into her cold, dark, dusty apartment, of seeing the easels draped like corpses in obscuring sheets.

It was nothing like that. Rachel, being Rachel, had the place clean, warm, and bright with scented candles and flowers. Nor did Karin's easels look like a disorganized haunting. They were uncovered, filling the studio with vivid, sensual hues and textures.

Standing on the kitchen-level landing, twisting the soft, unresisting hat in suddenly tense hands, Karin felt tears overflow onto her cheeks. Behind her in the kitchen, Rachel prattled on about a European opening and the Guggenheim's interest in her work for a U.S. tour of emerging artists. Karin ignored her, moving down into the living room on numb feet—from there to the studio, where she stopped in front of *The Jungle*.

It was beautiful. More than beautiful. It was stunning, magical. She could look at it now as if someone else had painted it. They might as well have, for while Karin remembered painting it, she did not remember what it *felt* like to paint it.

The disease might have killed her once; the cure was going to kill her over and over, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute.

"You're welcome," said Rachel, from the living room.

Karin turned to look at her, glad she had mistaken the tears for an expression of joy. Her real inner workings seemed mad even to herself. If she told Rachel what she was imagining—that there had been no tumor in her head, but a lens or window on another world or universe or dimension, and that with that conduit gone, she would never again paint anything remotely as original as this jungle or that city/starscape, or the desert she'd seen but feared to enter—Rachel could be forgiven for thinking she'd sustained brain damage. Such eccentricity might be considered charming in a brilliant artist. It would be pitied in a mundane one.

Rachel came to the canvas and put an arm around her shoulders. "This one's got to be nearly dry, right? I think we should send it on tour, don't you?"

"If you think so."

Rachel squeezed her, hard. "Hey, don't go all soft on me, Arneson. What do you think? Should we send it on a tour of the States or ship it off to the Euros?"

What she thought was that she would gladly send it anywhere to get it out of her studio and out of her sight. "The States tour sounds fine."

"As it happens, I can take care of that little piece of business today. You'll be all right by yourself here? I figured I'd come back for dinner."

"I'll be fine," Karin said. "Dinner is … is fine."

"Thank God you're not a writer."

"Cut me some slack; I've got a hole in my head."

Rachel chuckled her way to the kitchen, snagged her purse from the counter, and headed for the door. "That's my Karin. See you around six, OK?"

"Six," echoed Karin. "Fine. … Rache?"

She paused on the landing, door half open.

"Thank you. For everything."

"Thank me by filling Garfield's with fabulous new art." The door snicked shut.

Karin unpacked slowly, changed clothes, put on a new hat—festive, peacock green felt. Jungle color. She didn't feel festive.

Back out in the living room, she tried to avoid looking down into the studio and found it impossible. The canvases loomed, mocking and drawing her at once. They were oppressive, she told herself. She could hardly wait until Rachel sold them off.

She grabbed up a couple of dust sheets and marched into the studio, intending to cover them up. They refused to be covered. She could only stand and stare at them, sheets clutched in uncooperative hands. They were part of her—a ghost limb, lingering after the real thing had been severed. A ghost soul. She could never part with them.

The apartment was too quiet after the controlled chaos of a busy hospital ward. Craving noise and coffee, Karin dropped the sheets, threw on a jacket and shoes, and left the apartment. Distracted, she caught herself in the act of snatching up the small sketchpad she kept in a basket on the little table by the front door. Habit. She pulled her hand back, wrapped her jacket tight around her, and slipped out, heading for the bistro on Columbus.

The bistro was warm, crowded, noisy. She'd come here almost daily to collect faces, shapes, patterns of light and shadow. She'd also come here to sketch. Once. Maybe she'd met her cosmic Tour Guide here.

Today, she was just here to sit and drink lattes. She ordered one and sat down, belatedly deciding it was too warm to keep her jacket on. She wriggled out of it sitting, unwilling to stand up and court vertigo. She was wrestling it over the back of her chair when something fell out of the pocket onto the floor.

It was a small sketchpad, a pencil stuck through the metal spirals. She picked it up, set it on the table in front of her, and stared at it as if she'd never seen it before.

"Hey, Karin. Where've you been keeping yourself? And what's up with the hat? Bad hair day?" The waitress, a pert brunette named Kayla, delivered a latte with the once-over.

"Bad brain day," Karin said. "Had surgery. They cut a trapdoor in my head and removed my alien symbiont."

"Cute. You look like—"

"Yeah, I know—Ali McGraw."

"I was gonna say 'Oliver Twist.' Who's Ali McGraw?"

"Never mind."

She sipped her latte, watching the drawing pad as if it might do something of its own will. It didn't, so she started glancing around, falling back on habit, people watching. The pencil and pad seemed to come into her hand of their own accord. She doodled. A face here, a shadow there, a flurry of motion. All went onto the paper in black and white, and remained black and white, staying within the boundaries of the page. No mad color inserted itself.

She tried to call *The Garden* to mind and found its contours still there. But it was frozen, static, no longer kinetic and alive. And it was empty. No Alien Gardener appeared to beckon her in. She sketched it anyway, leaving her earlier doodles intact so that they seemed to grow up in the garden like eccentric flowers. The face of the young man at the table opposite hers took the place of the Tour Guide. It was not what she would have liked to draw.

"Say, that's really good." The waitress took her empty latte glass. She shook her head. "And wild. Where do you artistic types get your ideas, anyway? I'd never think of drawing anything like that. If I drew at all, I mean. Want another?" She waggled the glass.

"Sure. Thanks."

Karin sipped a second latte, studying the drawing propped up against the sugar jar. It was nothing like her vision: It lacked the extra dimensions, the hint of "otherness." Then again, it wasn't like the competent but unexceptional sketches she'd done before. She wondered what color would do for it.

Latte half-finished, she wriggled back into her jacket, picked up the sketchpad, dropped some cash on the table and left. Ten minutes later, she stood in front of a blank canvas, sketch taped to the top left corner. Behind her *The Jungle*, disenfranchised, sat on the floor, its vivid, alien landscape turned to the wall.

The naked white surface of the new canvas filled her eyes. Polar bear in a snowstorm. She could just title it that, she supposed, and fake her way through the rest of her career. Or …

Her scalp itched. She pulled off the peacock hat, tossed it toward the divan, and took a deep breath. Then she picked up a wide sable brush, dipped it in pigment, and began to paint. ❧

By Eric T. Baker

The arcade classic *Gauntlet* is back with a 3-D vengeance.

The first place that anyone got rich marketing virtual death was in the arcades. Virtual tennis may have gotten video games started, but it was virtual killing that turned out to be the big crowd pleaser. One of the games that pleased the crowd the most was *Gauntlet*, a fantasy game from Midway that let four players simultaneously take the roles of warriors and magic users while hacking and slashing and spell casting their way through a series of dungeons. Quick reflexes and good game play would keep the characters alive against the relentless onslaught of monsters and traps, but so would pumping quarters into the machine, literally purchasing more health.



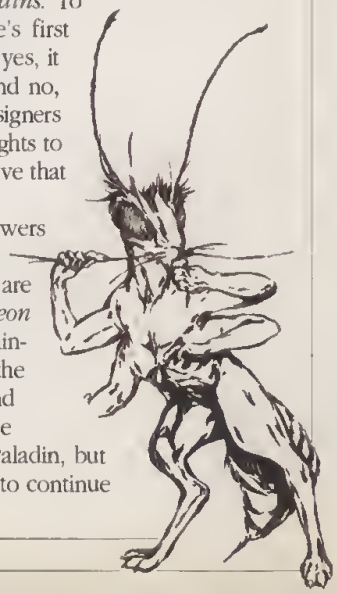
The Dying Earth Role-playing Game *is based on Jack Vance's novels and stories set in the 21st Aeon of Earth's history when the world might end tomorrow.*

The latest installment in the *Gauntlet* franchise is the full 3-D *Gauntlet: Dark Legacy*. It can be found in arcades, but it is also available for the home on the PlayStation 2 console. True to its roots, the game lets up to four players cooperate through eight dangerous worlds. Players may choose one of eight different characters: Warriors, Valkyries, Wizards, Jesters, Dwarves, Sorceresses, Archers, and Knights. They adventure through Mountain, Desert, Forest, Castle, Ice, Town, Sky, and Dream realms.

The adventuring consists of fighting creatures with weapons and magic, searching for treasure, evading traps, and going on quests for various items. Each character has a strong and a quick attack. These attacks can be combined in various ways to produce "combos" that are more effective than either attack used alone. Most characters can also use magic for various effects, including screen-clearing blasts and magical shields. Everyone also has turbo attacks. These depend on the turbo meter, which replenishes itself as the game goes on. The fuller the meter when a turbo attack is unleashed, the more damaging it is.

Gauntlet: DL has a game-save system that lets players transfer the character they've been playing on their machine, with all the character's gear, powers, potions, etc., to a different machine. This makes co-op play, the heart of the game, much easier. Twenty hidden characters, plus power-ups and special items, give the characters plenty to collect as they hack their way to victory.

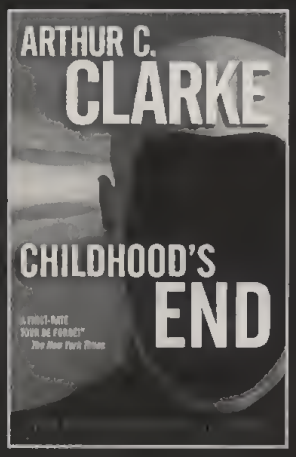
The latest accessory for *Third Edition Dungeons & Dragons* from Wizards of the Coast themselves is *Defenders of the Faith: A Guidebook to Clerics and Paladins*. To answer what has to be everyone's first questions on hearing of this book, yes, it covers Clerics of all alignments, and no, there are no anti-Paladins in it. Designers come and go, the owners of the rights to the game itself change and change again, but Gary Gygax's original directive that there be no anti-Paladins is maintained.



If, however, a player wants to run a faith-based fighter with special powers who happens to follow an evil god, that player is no longer without options. *Defenders* introduces 14 new Prestige Classes, several of which are playable by evil characters. Prestige Classes were introduced in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and differ from normal classes in that they require certain minimum skills and abilities as well as statistics for characters to qualify. Thus the character starts as base class, and when it has gained enough experience and abilities, it adds the Prestige Class as a second class. Not all of the Prestige Classes in this book demand that the character's first class be Cleric or Paladin, but they do all demand that the character keeps a right relation with his god to continue earning experience and gaining powers.

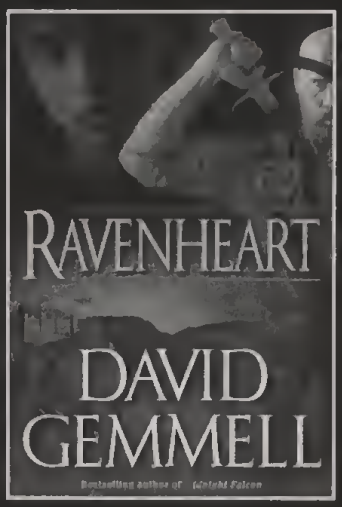
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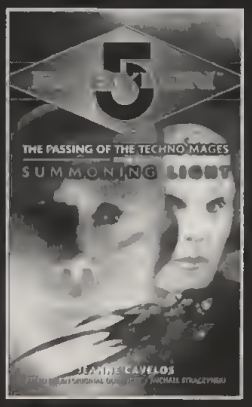
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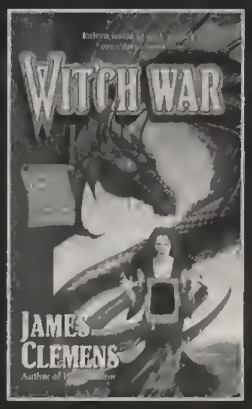
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The Prestige Classes are in Chapter Three. Chapter One is a series of essays on the care and feeding of Clerics and Paladins: advice on weapons and tactics, spell learning and use, keeping right with their gods, and even praying for divine intervention. There are three long, fun pages on special mounts for Paladins, including how to get a dragon to agree to be the character's mount. This chapter also contains new feats, gear, and magic items. Chapter Two is devoted to Churches and Organizations. There is a general section that applies to all churches, and then there are specific notes about particular churches devoted to each alignment. Each alignment gets sections on Dogma, Clerics, other characters, and often a writeup of a sample church. At the end of the chapter are writeups of six religious orders, followed by notes for when Clerics or Paladins rise so high that they have to take over a church, temple, or order. Chapter Four contains the lists of new spells for the Clerics, Druids, Rangers, and Paladins. The appendix contains paragraph-long descriptions of gods for the vanous monstrous races, including the Giants and the Dragons.

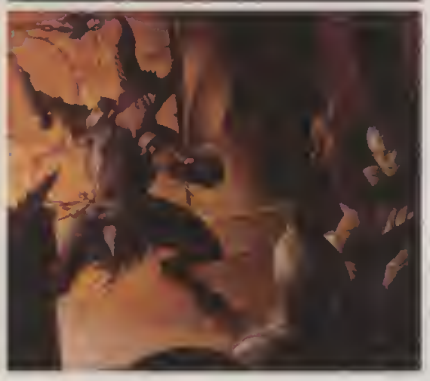
No *D&D* party is complete without a Cleric, and Paladins are one of the glamour classes in the game. Whole chivalric campaigns can be based around the trials of a single Paladin, bound for greatness and glory. *Defenders of the Faith* has what players and their DM need to keep the campaign on track, not just for player characters, but also for the nonplayer characters who will be the characters' followers, opponents, leaders, and friends.

The vulgarities of publishing being what they are, this month sees two new basic roleplaying game books from Robin Laws, the terrific designer of *Feng Shui*. Both games are from licensed properties, one property the series of books that inspired the magic of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the other property a video game that has its charms.

First up is *The Dying Earth Roleplaying Game* from Pelgrane Press which is based on the legendary Jack Vance's series of novels and short stories set in the 21st Aeon of Earth's history, when the sun is burning down and the world might end tomorrow. It is a decadent, selfish, and sometimes cruel future where fine clothes and fine words are the rule of the day. More important to the history of fantasy gaming, magic has returned to the world, and many of Vance's heroes and villains are sorcerers of a greater







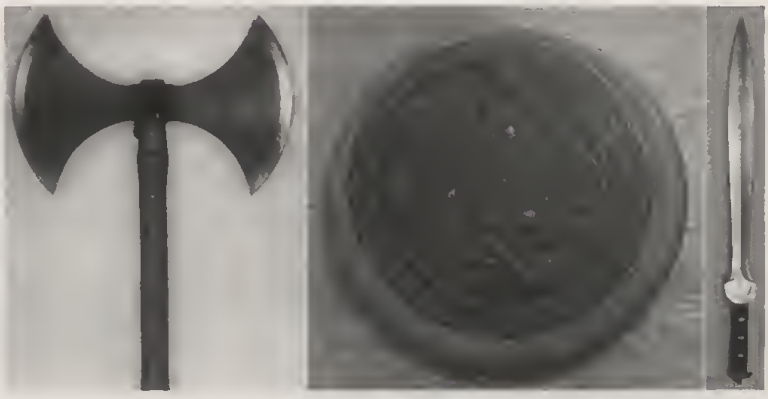
or lesser degree. It was the system of magic described in Vance's books that inspired the magic used in *D&D*.

The system for resolving magic in *Dying Earth* was designed by John Snead and stays faithful to the books. Nearly anyone of "taste, breeding, or education" can know a spell or two, spells for anything from giving one's enemy a painful rash to holding a particularly intricate hairstyle in place. Besides such Dabblers, there are two other classes of sorcerers: Magicians and Arch-Magicians. Magicians are people who have turned themselves over to magic as a way of life and spend their time collecting spells, items, and knowledge. Arch-Magicians may know something of spells and artifacts, but their power comes from their command of the nearly omnipotent sandestins. Snead's rules cover playing any of these three types, even putting sufficient limits on Arch-Magicians so that they are not only playable, but in fact just as big a challenge as playing a Dabbler or a non-magic-using character.

The emphasis in the *Dying Earth* game, as it is in the books, is not on contests of strength or of skill or of honor. What the game is about is quick dialogue and the quest for an easy life, a goal made all the sweeter if it comes at the expense of an enemy or rival. To this end, the game lavishly reprints select lines and exchanges from

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Fantasy or Sci Fi?

With plenty of high-powered energy cannons, planet-hopping starships, and body-altering cyberware, *Fading Suns* (Holistic Design Inc., hardback, 306 pp., $34.95) has everything that a dyed-in-the-wool science fiction gamer would need.

So why is it being reviewed in a *fantasy* magazine?

Because in addition to all of the above, *Fading Suns* has plenty of knights in shining armor, horrible soul-shattering demons and miraculous magics.

Perhaps an explanation is in order.

In the 51st century, the suns themselves are dying. Humanity, having attained a star-spanning Second Republic that encompassed hundreds of worlds and dozens of separate species, lost it all when petty jealousy, political infighting, and spiritual depravity reduced their paradise to a feudal empire run by five royal Houses. In addition to this secular government, which looks after its people's physical welfare, the Church of the Celestial Sun exists to look after the spiritual concerns of its flock and is largely modeled after the Roman Catholic Church of the Renaissance, complete with its own version of the Spanish Inquisition. Rounding out the big trio is the Merchant League, a Hanseatic organization that simply exists to look after its own fiscal well-being.

All this would serve to make a fairly standard (or at best slightly unconventional) SF game, if it weren't for the strong current of mysticism that runs throughout the setting. The average *Fading Suns* peasant has an education level roughly that of an actual medieval peasant, and will be in awe of "magical items" like communications gear or energy weapons (not to mention concepts like hygiene and literacy ...). Psychic powers in the game work likewise; what was once seen as a perfectly normal and measurable skill by scientists of the Second Republic is now viewed as the province of warlocks, hedge-witches, and Corruptors of the Faith. In addition to these perceived magics, there is a sort of "real" magic; it seems that something (or some*things*) live beyond the boundaries of normal perception and, if petitioned loudly enough, can be called upon to perform deeds for the petitioner. These gifts take on the appearance of miracles (for those who work within the Church) or spells (for antinomists, a particularly insidious form of demon worshipper). Many mystical abilities can also be bound into items, creating vestments and holy relics that often parallel standard RPG magical weapons and items.

All of this is run on a system reminiscent of White Wolf's *World of Darkness* dice mechanic (which is rather fitting, considering that the two head designers of the game also helped design *Vampire: The Masquerade* and *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*) crossed with Blackjack. You simply roll a 20-sided die against a target number, trying to get as close as you can without going over. The closer you are, the more successes you get. It's short and sweet and rarely (if ever) gets in the way of gameplay.



The nicest thing about *Fading Suns* is, of course, the fact that it caters not only to fantasy gamers or SF gamers, but to both breeds,and a variety of others in be- tween. GMs who prefer more fantasy can keep high-tech out of the PCs' hands, confine them to a single world, and make sure that they find a few saintly relics. Those who prefer more science fiction can hand out laser rifles and starships, and send the characters around the galaxy. *Fading Suns* is best, however, when a balance is achieved, when high-tech *is* magic, and when space-faring magicians and pistol-packing demon hunters follow in the future a path that was laid down in the mythic past.

Speaking of RPGs that are equal parts fantasy and science fiction, Game Designer's Workshop's classic *Space: 1889* (Heliograph Inc., softback, 218 pp., $29.95) has recently been reprinted by Heliograph Press. Billed as "science fiction role-playing in a more civilized time," *Space: 1889* is science fiction as seen through the eyes of 19th-century science romance writers such as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, as well as a host of other, lesser known pulp authors.

Space: 1889 makes the supposition that Thomas Edison's greatest invention was not the light-bulb or the phonograph, but the ether engine, a device that allows ironclad ether ships to traverse the distances between the planets. Colonies have been established in the steppes of Mars and the swamps of Venus, the natives of both worlds are slowly being subjugated, and the great European nations are experiencing a growth boom like no other, as they are suddenly confronted with more land and natural resources than they know what to do with. Opportunities abound for explorers, scientists, and the military to find fame and fortune by battling hostile Highland Martians or hunting Venusian dinosaurs. And of course, all of this is wrapped in a thick layer of Victorian propriety.

The mechanics should be familiar to anyone who has played any of GDW's older games, particularly *Megatraveller*. Characters get a number of career options to mix and match, as well as a number of loose skill points, to build their initial abilities. Skill checks are made with six-sided dice and, like in West End's *Star Wars* or *Metabarons*, the more the merrier. Owing to the fact that this is an old GDW game, most of the career choices for characters have something to do with the military. Most characters will be human, although very sparse optional rules are available for playing Martians (no such luck for the lizardmen from Venus).

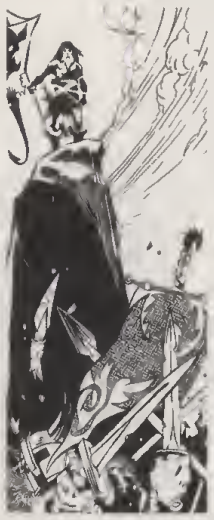
Because this is pretty much a straight reprint, with very little in the way of revisions or extra material, some of the game's rough spots still persist. Combat on the whole is fairly easy to manage, although things get a little tricky in melee. Cascade skills can also be a little confusing at points; when trying to spear a Venusian with a rifle-mounted bayonet, a player and I were unsure as to whether "bayonet" was a separate cascade of "melee," or if it defaulted to "polearms." Problems like this are few and far between, however, and tend to be quite easy to work around.

So, I guess the real question is: "Is it science fiction or fantasy?" Truthfully, I think that it's a little of both. Although you won't find any powerful spells or magic swords or dragons (unless you count the dinosaurs) in it, it flaunts all thoughts of modern science, instead working with "what could have been," and in the process creates a game with mystery, action, and derring-do to rival most any high-fantasy RPG.

And you get to do it all in a pith helmet. ❧

Jim Stutz

Vance's books, plus includes three new stories by Peter Freeman set on the Dying Earth. Most important, at the start of each adventure, players are given three taglines (such as "Although I see why you wish to avoid the subject, my interest remains undimmed," or "Your proposal is so winning, I can only conclude I have yet to hear all the terms."), either from the books or in the books' style. Each time the player manages to have his or her character drop one of these taglines into the dialogue of the game, the character receives a hefty experience point bonus. And the taglines are all the easier to drop if the character is already speaking in the properly ironic mode.



The game's system is simple and elegant, a Robin Laws trademark. Characters have a pool of dice for each of their primary statistics. To attempt a test, the player rolls a six-sided die. Four and above is a success. If the player fails, he or she may roll again for as many times as the dice pool lasts. When the player succeeds, the character or thing opposing the test may roll using a die from its pool. If the player fails, he or she may use the pool to roll again. When the player succeeds, the original character can either yield, or spend a die to roll again. And so on.

The primary statistics are Persuade, Rebuff, Attack, and Defense. Magic users also have a magic pool. Each of these stats is given one of six modes that distinguish how they are used. Attack might be based on Strength or Cunning, while Defense might rely on Dodge or Vexation. A character's mode of persuasion might be Glibness or Obfuscation while its Rebuff might be Obtuse or Pure-Hearted. The modes serve two purposes. For one, they give the keys that allow the descriptions of the various contests to be fleshed out beyond dry results of the die rolls. For another they determine how the dice pools refresh when they have been depleted. For instance, Glibness is refreshed by "a night's rest, a hot bath, and a change of clothes," while Pure-Hearted is refreshed by "seeing evidence that honesty and virtue triumph in the end." Characters also have skills, each with their own pool and method of refresh.

The mind shift needed by most roleplayers who come to this game is not just the move away from physical combat as the primary resolution system (lots of games are interested in things besides killing), but also the fact that arguments have a dice-based system. Players used to winning arguments and disagreements because they are smarter than their characters may find this an unwelcome



change, while players who like to run characters more glib than themselves may find it a pleasant change. The important thing is that it fits the source material where the heroes often find themselves facing impossible odds but manage to escape by quick talking and clever plotting.

Overall, the *Dying Earth* rule book is a joy to read. The fictions are entertaining, the rules are ironic and clear all at the same time. The art is sparse, but what there is of it is good, and the quotes from Vance do more to set the world than art would in any case. There is a good table of contents, a better index, amus-



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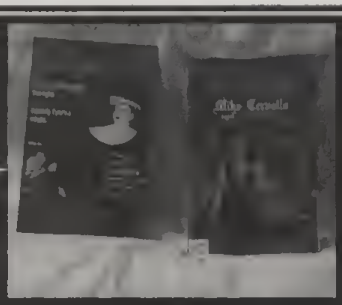
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ing footnotes in the Vance style, and an introductory adventure. There are sections on the world and the prominent people in it, as well as sections describing monsters, spells, and artifacts. It is everything players and a GM need to create a successful campaign in one of the seminal gaming fantasy worlds.

Robin Laws' other game out this month is the polar opposite of *Dying Earth*. *Rune*, from Atlas Games, is based on the video game of the same name from Human Head Studios. Instead of being set in the far future, it is set in the distant past. Instead of being about cultured decadents, it is about uncouth Vikings. Instead of being about the fine play of wits and words, it is about killing and killing some more. Instead of being about the players working together, it is about the players competing against each other and against the GM.

Rune is an attempt to create a tabletop experience that is similar to the one provided by the video game. What players do in the video game is guide their character through a series of levels, killing goblins and other horrors, collecting treasure and magic, which makes the character more powerful so that it can kill bigger, nastier monsters to earn more treasure and magic. In other words, it is back to the formula of the original *D&D* games. Robin Laws' version of *Rune* has the same formula but with the added twist of being a competition.

One irony of the hack-and-slash mayhem of *Rune* is that the mechanics are based on those of *Ars Magica*, one of the least hack-and-slash fantasy roleplaying games ever written. Almost everything is resolved by a simple 10-sided die modified by characteristics and skills. The magic system is much simpler than in *Ars* because there are no wizards in the game. Everyone plays a Viking Warrior. The characters can gain magical abilities, but they don't even resemble the complexity or breadth of the spells used by mages in *Ars*.

In most other RPGs, the Game Master tries to be fair and impartial. The GM creates the encounters and runs the NPCs, all with an eye toward making sure the players have a good time. In *Rune* the GM still creates the encounters and runs the NPCs, but the goal is not to give the players a good time. The goal is to earn more victory points than any of them do. Similarly, whereas most encounters and adventures are limited in their design only by the imagination of the GM, the GM in *Rune* must build the adventure with points so that it comes out balanced between threats to the player and rewards for them. The GM wants to hurt the characters—a lot—but he loses victory points if they actually die. The characters, meanwhile, earn points for overcoming the GM's monsters and traps and for not dying.

All of this is told in a jolly, "What kind of Viking are you?" tone. For instance, players earn points for dealing damage to monsters, and another bonus in points for striking the killing blow. Thus, one character could whittle a monster down, only to have another

character swoop in and take the kill. The rules' response to this is, "So what? Steal his kill next time. You're playing a Viking! You want fair, go play another game." It's not as fun a read as *Dying Earth*, but it is still entertaining.

The largest chapters in *Rune* are the ones on creating an adventure, but it also has a good table of contents, an index, a sample adventure, and maps, plus cheat and character sheets. There are lists of traps and monsters and treasures and items. The game is different and it is fun, and it might be just the way to get those players in the group who never let the Game Master take a turn.







Kingdoms of Kalamar: Campaign Setting is a jaw-droppingly beautifully and stunningly complete hardbacked, 270-page book with two oversized, full-color, foldout maps from Kenzer & Company licensed for the *Dungeons & Dragons* RPG. The book covers the cities and towns of the two waning human empires, plus the Younger Kingdoms and smaller countries. There are writeups for the gods, organizations, codes of law and language, armies, and even a chart with the names, alignments, race and sex, location, and class, and level of the 270 major NPCs that are written up along with their cities and towns of residence in the rest of the book. Filled with color and hundreds of adventure ideas, *Kalamar* looks like the basis of years of fun.



Another licensed *D&D* setting is *Scarred Lands* from Swords and Sorcery Studios. *The Scarred Lands Gazetteer: Ghelspad* provides the background to the world's largest continent, but on a much smaller and less complete scale than *Kalamar*. (softbound, 48 pages, one foldout color map). It lists cities and towns and gods and organizations, but not only does it list fewer NPCs, it doesn't give any stats for the ones it does list. Certainly *Ghelspad* is easier to digest, but it lacks the depth to keep a campaign going.

And, yes, supplements do still come out for games that aren't *D&D*. *The Way of the Shadowlands* from Alderac Entertainment Group is a supplement for the long-running *Legend of the Five Rings* game. The Shadowlands have always been the off-limits part of the world. The place where the evil and the enemies come from. Now with this supplement, players can choose to run characters stricken with the Shadowlands taint, or else who are native to the Shadowlands. The supplement contains new Advantages, Disadvantages, and Schools. There are writeups of Tainted lands beyond the Shadowlands themselves, what happens when an Oni steals a character's name, and how the character gets it back. Plus there are new magic and spells for monks and magic users tainted by the Shadowlands.



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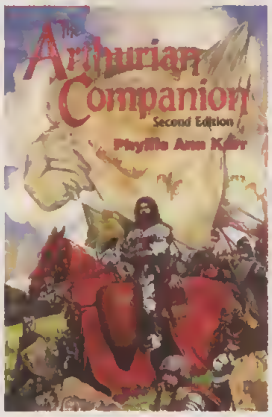


books

Continued from page 39

Davidson Treasury (1998), followed the same year by *The Boss in the Wall,* and shortly afterward by *The Investigations of Avram Davidson* (1999). Now we have the current book, subtitled "Essential Jewish Tales of the Spirit," and edited by Jack Dann and Grania Davis. (And soon to come is another collection, *The Other Nineteenth Century.*) Not a bad legacy, and better than many other authors fare after their deaths.





The volume under discussion today is divided into several sections. First comes Davidson's early works: sketches, poems, and short stories printed from 1947 to the start of Davidson's fully professional career. Serving as a break at midpoint is a small symposium wherein fellow writers reminisce about Davidson. Next up: a selection of Davidson's mature work. Finally, to close: some previously unpublished gems found among Davidson's effects after his death.

Each item is perceptively introduced by one of the editors, or in other cases by Davidson's son Ethan or by his literary custodian, Henry Wessells. These fact-filled paragraphs set everything firmly in historical and literary context. Additionally, a biographical essay by Eileen Gunn rounds out the book.

Because Davidson's religion was so essential to his art, having a chance to read his apprentice work centering on Judaic topics is invaluable, offering insights into all his later work. These stories by a young man just finding his stride are themselves well crafted and entertaining, albeit not of the magnitude of later work, although the brief parable "The Fisherman ... A Tashlich Legend" packs a certain punch. But the fully formed stories are just glorious. "The Golem," "Goslin Day," "Dr. Morris Goldpepper Returns," and "The Crown Jewels of Jerusalem" all exhibit the unique Davidson blend of erudition, goofiness, and pathos. And the brand-new finds tease with dreams of what might have been had Davidson lived longer.

Taken as a whole, this book is a crucial piece of the Davidson monument still abuilding.

Contact Devora Publishing at 40 East 78th Street, Suite 16D, NY, NY 10021.

Artemis Fowl, *by Eoin Colfer; Talk Miramax Books, NY; hardcover, 208 pp.; $16.95*

Now I feel so cheap. Despite my better literary judgment, I gave in to a sweet-talking book with no morals, and indulged in a night of mindless consensual narrative. Waking up this morning, I hardly knew whether to savor the memories or berate myself.

Artemis Fowl comes from a trio of publishers, of whom Hyperion Books for Children is the most high-minded. The other partners are Disney ('nuff said) and Talk Miramax, whose stated aim is to synergize the printed page and the silver screen. In fact, *Fowl* is already destined to be a film. The press release for *Fowl* rather shamelessly invokes J.K. Rowling, Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis and touts the bidding war this book prompted. Plainly, we are in the realm of major product launch here, rather than "pure" literature.

Without passing a harsh verdict on all this foofarah, let's just examine the book.

The title character is a 12-year-old evil genius with a back-story of many misdeeds. His manservant, Butler the butler, is a deadly killing machine and gourmet cook. Artemis's current scheme revolves around capturing a denizen of Faery and holding the captive for a golden ransom. The Kingdom of Faery, it turns out, has retreated to a world at the Earth's Core and adopted much of the technology and organizational modes of mankind to supplement their magic. But the Fey occasionally come above-ground, and Artemis manages to snag one. From here on, the plot concerns the night of violent blows and counterblows between Artemis and the Faery rescuers.

Colfer is moderately funny, moderately ingenious, moderately gross, and moderately ironic. You'll absorb this tale painlessly, with minor epiphanies. But he's got no chops we haven't seen before, in the works of William Goldman, Mary Gentle, Tom Holt, Piers Anthony, or Terry Pratchett. He moves the action along crisply and cleverly (although there are a few awkward, illogical bits, such as a troll's claws being sufficient to rend Kevlar but not a suit of medieval armor), and the characterizations are shiny, if hollow.

But this book has so many hooks to past media outings that the tuggings begin to itch. Bits of *Dexter's Laboratory, Men in Black, Mission Impossible,* and the James Bond oeuvre rise up like specters, emit their ghostly howls, then dissipate. And do we really need all the product placement, and yet another scene where a character outraces a fireball?

You'll enjoy this book as you would an amusement park ride. But glee can turn to tummy-upset quite easily.

Acolytes of Chthulu, *Robert Price, ed.; Fedogan & Bremer, MN; hardcover; 390 pp.; $32.00.*

Robert Price's byline on any anthology is a guarantee of good reading, and this current volume is no exception. Price has assembled 28 overlooked and even unpublished stories relating to the Lovecraftiverse, gems that hardly anyone except a scholar such has himself is likely to have recently seen. Absent from this volume are the first-string Acolytes such as Robert Bloch and Clark Ashton Smith, Henry Kuttner and Ramsey Campbell. But it turns out that the benchwarmers serving in their stead are nearly as intriguing.

Price's introduction seeks, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, to explain the continuing popularity of Lovecraft's tales. He makes a strong enough case for the merits of HPL's oeuvre that you are almost willing to grant him his thesis that "Lovecraft has become our Christ, our God." Immediately following are some superb stories that further buttress the argument, as motley an assortment of oddities as ever assembled on the frozen plains of Yuggoth. Price has rescued from oblivion such intriguing writers as Steffan Aletti (with three stories) and Arthur Pendragon (possibly a pen name for the slightly better known Arthur Porges). He has commissioned a new translation of a story by Gustav Meyrink (1868-1932), "The Purple Death," and also convinced Franklyn Searight, the son of HPL contemporary Richard Searight, to complete one of the father's unfinished stories. Add such pulp triumphs as Edmond Hamilton's "The Earth-Brain" and David Keller's accidentally gonzo "The Final War," in which Chthulu comes to Earth as a giant frog, splits himself into hideous male and female humanoids, mates with himself, and gives birth to an evil sex-goddess—well, it just doesn't get any better than this. Unless you factor in the killer Gahan Wilson cover illustration.

Order your accursed tome from Fedogan & Bremer, 3721 Minnehaha Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55406.

Issola, *by Steven Brust; Tor Books, NY; hardcover; 256 pp.; $22.95.*

Time now for another implementation of the Patented Di Filippo Reader-Friendly-Series Test, as we dip into the latest volume of another long-running fantasy chronicle without prior familiarity.

Brust began the sequence we're sampling today way back in 1983 with *Jhereg.* Most volumes since then have dealt with the assassin Vlad Taltos, a member of the human minority in a strange world adjacent to ours, populated by various races of differing magical capabilities, including living gods. The dominant species are the Dragaera, physically and supernaturally impressive types akin to Middle Earth Elves.

Our story opens with Taltos—at this juncture in his life a hunted refugee accompanied only by his reptile familiars—awakened by a midnight visitor, who proves to be a former acquaintance, the issola Lady Teldra. She informs him of the disappearance of two of his Dragaera friends, Morrolan and Aliera. Teldra has been sent by a master sorceress, Sethra, to find Taltos and bring him back to attempt a rescue mission. Taltos's agreement launches him into yet another dimension, where lurk the endlessly plotting Jenoine, who long to take over Taltos's world. Magical battles laced with swordplay and scheming ensue.

How easily does this book accommodate the newbie? Quite well, as the long back-story is efficiently doled out, and Vlad Taltos's intricate personal relationships are cleanly diagrammed. (Moreover, Taltos and his world undergo real evolutionary changes, not just another repetitive adventure.) Of course, a novice misses many of the resonances planted by Brust, and might sometimes be puzzled. But this does not hinder the overall flow of narrative, which zips merrily along.

Brust has frequently been compared to Roger Zelazny, for the good reason that both writers mix high tragedy and low comedy, and blend the mythic with the popular. At times I was also reminded of Philip Jose Farmer's *World of Tiers* sequence and Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser books. Brust does not rank quite as high on the literary scale as these giants, but he can hold his head up proudly in their company.

My one complaint about this funny and kinetic adventure is the limited locales. Here, by my count, are the venues of this story: a campsite, a town, a mountain lair, a castle, a prison cell, and a few acres outside the cell. This limited scenery hardly gives one a panoramic view of Brust's subcreation. But I suppose we must seek out earlier books for that.

The Arthurian Companion, *by Phyllis Ann Karr; Green Knight Publishing, CA; trade paper; 591 pp.; $17.95.*

As she explains in her foreword, Karr has been conducting Arthurian researches since the 1970s, and this book has seen earlier, less complete incarnations a couple of times since then. Whatever the earlier versions looked like, this one is a hefty marvel. An alphabetically arranged tour of the people, places, and things accreted onto the Court of Arthur down the centuries by innumerable writers, this volume provides endless browsability. Each entry reads like a small narrative so that turning, for example, to "Nimue" we get two pages containing that sorceress's life story in lucid, vivid abridgement. Also, nearly one hundred pages of appendices deliver further hard data not categorizable by individual entries.

This ranks as an indispensable reference work for any fantasy lover's shelf.

You can reach Green Knight at 900 Murmansk Street, Suite 5, Oakland, CA 94607.

Paul Di Filippo



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time and space

Continued from page 59

pray for guidance. And somewhere around dawn, when the light was touching the eastern sky with the color of resurrection, that guidance came.

The everyday world around me seemed to grow suddenly thin, as though it were nothing more than a membrane separating myself from the true reality. With infinite slowness, it began to peel away, layer by layer, until the very fabric of the universe was revealed. I was kneeling in the sea of time and space. Before me lay a wasteland of stars: suns boiling into being and shedding their light within the space of a few seconds, and the flickers of life around them nothing more than sparks that were soon gone. I looked into the whirling spiral void of the universe and knew that I was seeing things as a god might see them, each millennium nothing more than the blink of an eye. How, I thought despairingly, in the midst of that vast expanse where the greatest sun was nothing more than a pinprick flicker of light, how was I to find something as infinitesimally minute as the soul of a flea?

But moments, or millennia, passed and gradually I became aware that I was not alone in this cauldron of creation. Immense presences passed by, striding from one sun to another in a single step. They had been there all along, but they were almost too vast for me to see. I looked down, though the term had little relevance, and saw that what I had mistaken for the corona of a galaxy was the trailing hair of a Presence. Angel or demon, it filled me with awe, and I paused for a moment before setting thought firmly aside and letting myself plummet into the void. An instant later, and I was among the coils of hair, like a flea in the mane of a horse. Struggling upward, at last I glimpsed the curve of a cheek and a vast and glittering eye. A spark of acknowledgment entered it, and Someone paused. A voice that filled the vaults of the universe itself said, "What do *you* want?"

I would have thought my own voice would be too small to be heard, but it seemed to ring out nonetheless. "I seek the soul of a flea."

"The soul of a flea?" the Voice repeated. "However do you hope to find so tiny a thing?"

"I do not know," I said. "I only know that it is this that I must find, to set free someone who has been punished for so long that he cannot help himself." *And to save my own soul,* I thought, but did not say.

"Look at what you see," the Voice said, in merriment. "Here among infinity, where a sun is nothing more than a speck of dust, you seek a soul? Are you a god, to know where such a thing may be found?"

"I am nothing more than a man."

"Then I suggest you look in the nearest place where a soul might be found," the Voice said. And with that Someone twitched in the manner of an impatient steed and flung me

free. I fell through worlds, drawn by the pull of my own frail flesh, but just before the vision left me I saw the figure turn and stride away, its crimson wings outstretched among the stars and suns sent spinning with a flick of its tail. Then I was back in the housing of my own body and falling to the floor.

I regained consciousness toward evening. Hauling myself stiffly to the bed, I lay down to ponder what my interlocutor had told me. After a time, I thought I had an answer, though it was not one that filled me with joy. Yet were my dreams and visions not sent to help my fellow man, whatever form they might take, or whatever meanness they might embody? *Blessed is he who gives up his life for a friend*—yet what would this mean to me, who so regularly passed between the portals of life and death? No, the sacrifice that was asked of me was greater than my life, because of the gift that I possessed, but perhaps it was also less dreadful than I feared. For it came to me then that in the old desert religion to which the ghost had once belonged, they spoke of the soul as being in three parts, not one. I lay lost in thought, and as twilight fell the ghost congealed out of the shadows.

"Well," he said, sadly. "You have failed, then." His hot-coal eyes were haunted.

"No," I said, smiling at him. "I have not failed. I have found you a soul. Or at least, enough of one to give you your freedom."

"My soul? Then where is it?"

"I did not say that I had found *your* soul." *Look in the nearest place where a soul might be found,* the Presence had said. I held out my hand. Wonderingly, the ghost placed its own within it and I felt something leave me like a breath, so that I was suddenly as hollow and empty as a stripped reed. The ghost seemed to waver, as though heat had passed between us, and the eyes that looked into mine were no longer red as fire but dark and human, like the eyes of the man he should have been had evil not reached out and touched him with its tongue. His skin flushed golden-green; he became as a lizard in the sunlight. The ghost smiled and was abruptly gone. And I was more alone than I had ever been before.

I have not explained the nature of my illness to my wife, telling her only that I may have caught a chill in the absence of her devoted care. I have closed the print shop for the time being, and spend my time wrapped in a blanket and staring into the fire. I was not, I think, mistaken about the nature of my sacrifice. God has taught us that it is necessary to give in order to receive, and it seems to me that, now spring is almost here, I can detect the presence of new growth within the fractured parts of my soul, like a seed from a scattered flower. I think of it growing into that many-petalled lotus which I used to see so clearly but only now truly understand. The visions are absent, for now, but I have no doubt that they will return, when I and my new-grown soul are ready for them. ❧

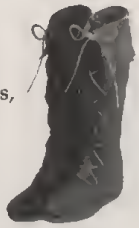


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ERIC DAVID ANDERSON is an artist and illustrator who works from his home studio in South Bend, Indiana. After graduating with an art degree, Mr. Anderson studied with the classical realist painter Richard Lack in Minneapolis. He has been published in numerous fantasy games and magazines, and also works on occasional private commissions and fine art projects. He especially favors oriental subjects, which he grew to love while living 10 years in Korea and Singapore.

Born in California, raised in Nebraska, and living once again in the Golden State, **MAYA KAATHRYN BOHNHOFF** still considers herself a mid-westerner. Her interest in science fiction dates from the night her Dad let her stay up late to watch a movie Mom never would have approved: *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The rest is history. Her short fiction has been published in *Analog, Amazing Stories, Century,* and *Interzone*, her first four fantasy novels were published by Baen, with a fifth contemporary fantasy novel due out next Christmas from Harper-Prism (Book 2 in Marc Scott Zicree's *Magic Time* series). Her first novel, *The Meri*, made *Locus*'s Best First Novel and Recommended Reading lists. In 1999 her short story "The White Dog" (*Interzone* #142) made the short list for the British Science Fiction Award. Maya also writes and performs music with her husband Jeff, with whom she has co-authored two amazing children.

CHARLES DE LINT is a full-time writer and musician who presently makes his home in Ottawa, Canada, with his wife MaryAnn Harris, an artist and musician. His most recent books are the novel *Forests of the Heart* (Tor Books, 2000) and *Triskell Tales*, an illustrated collection of short stories (Subterranean Press, 2000). Other recent publications include a trade paperback reprint of his sf novel *Svaha* (Orb, 2000) as well as mass-market editions of his novel *Someplace to Be Flying* (Tor Books, 1999) and *Moonlight and Vines* (Tor Books, 2000), a third collection of Newford stories which recently won the World Fantasy Award. For more information about his work, visit his Web site at <www.charlesdelint.com>.

KAREN HABER is the author of eight novels. Her short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction,* and various anthologies. In her secret identity as an art journalist, she reviews art books for *Locus* and has profiled many of the top artists in the sci fi and fantasy fields. She lives with her spouse, the writer Robert Silverberg, near San Francisco.

MARY SOON LEE has had over 50 stories published, including work in *Amazing Stories, Fantasy & Science Fiction, Interzone, On Spec, Spectrum SF, Sword & Sorceress* 14 and 18, and the *Year's Best Science Fiction* Numbers 4 and 5. Her first book, *Winter Shadows and Other Tales,* will be published by Dark Regions Press in 2001. Mary grew up in London, but now lives in Pittsburgh, where she runs a writers' group called the Pittsburgh Worldwrights. She reports, with no bias whatsoever, that her two-year-old son is unusually cute.

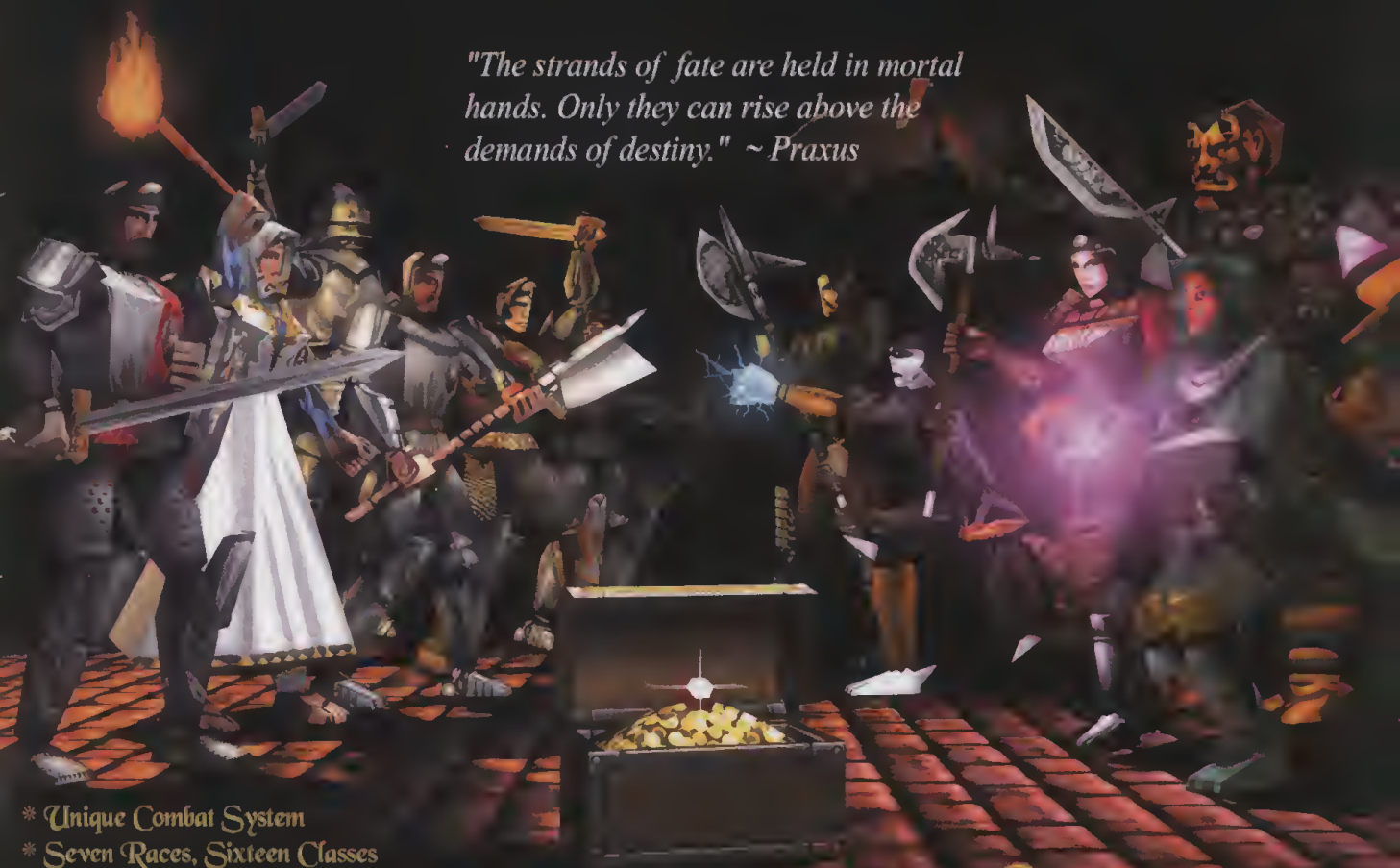
TERRY MCGARRY worked at *The New Yorker Magazine* for 15 years, but escaped in early 2000 and is now a full-time writer and freelance copyeditor, playing Irish traditional music on the side. Her novel *Illumination,* recently released by Tor Books, is the story of what comes of the mages' exile described in "Limnery in Cursive."

JACK SLAY, JR. teachs literature and composition at LaGrange College in Georgia. He is married to Lori and they have three boys, Kirk, Justin, and Reed. In between teaching and parenting, he writes (usually in the wee hours). Jack has published in such places as *Mississippi, Scouting, The Habersham Review, The Flint River Review,* and, most recently, in the ezines *Dark Planet* and *ShadowKeep.* Having been born and reared in Mississippi and having lived most his adult life in Georgia, there is something of the Southern Gothic in most his writing, something a little more than evident in this story ("Once") of Bailey Threadgill, his family, and their wayward vacation.

LIZ WILLIAMS is the daughter of a conjurer and a Gothic novelist, and currently lives in Brighton, England. She has a Ph.D. in philosophy of science from Cambridge and her anti-career ranges from reading tarot cards on Brighton pier to teaching in Central Asia. Her novel *The Ghost Sister* will be published by Bantam in July 2001 and a second novel, *Empire of Bones,* is due in April 2002. Liz has had short fiction published in *Asimov's, Interzone, The Third Alternative and Visionary Tongue,* among others, and is co-editor of the recent anthology *Fabulous Brighton.* She is also the current secretary of the Milford UK SF Writers' Workshop.

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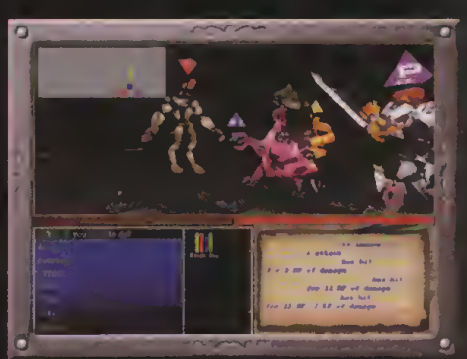
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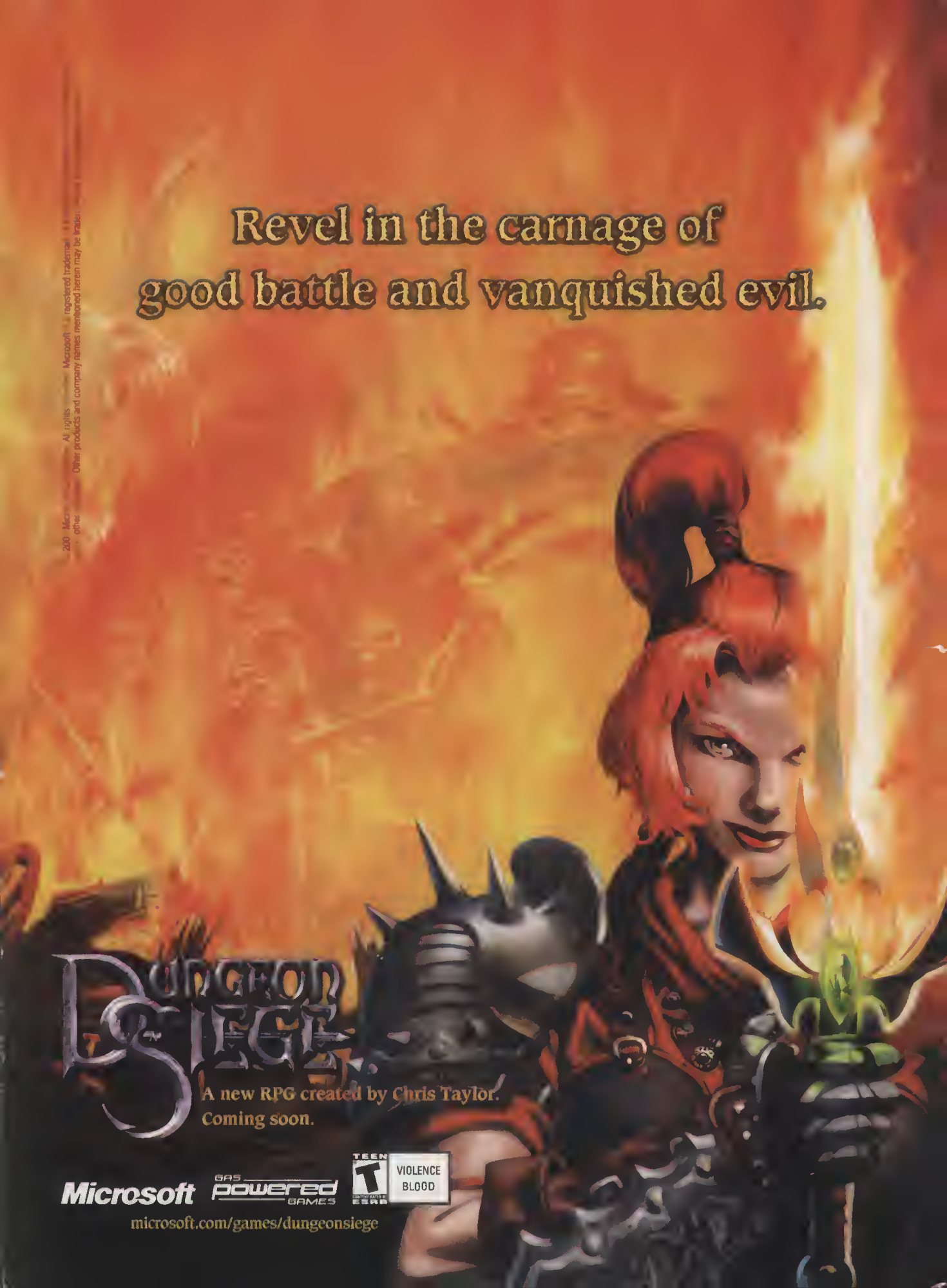






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